

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 128.

Last time, after Shu had tried to invade the rival kingdom of Wei for the third time, Wei decided to return the favor and launch its own invasion of Shu. But that invasion was literally washed out by a monthlong torrential downpour. While the Wei army was slogging home, Zhuge Liang began prepping for his fourth Northern expedition. Again, his sights were first set on the key Wei city of Chang'an, and he told his officers that he would march the army to Qi Mountain, just like he did on the previous three campaigns. But his officers were kind of skeptical.

"There are other routes to the region around Chang'an, why does your excellency keep insisting on go through Qi Mountain?" they asked him.

"The main road to Chang'an runs through Qi Mountain," Zhuge Liang explained. "Enemy troops from the region have to go through there. Besides, the hills border the Wei (4) River in the front and Xie (2) Gorge in the rear. That allows us to maneuver left and right and hide troops. This is a good place to wage war. That's why I want to take it first, so that I can have a geographical advantage."

That explanation satisfied the men, so Zhuge Liang split his forces. He sent one army through Ji Gorge and another through Xie Gorge, and they were to converge at Qi Mountain. He then led the main army and appointed Guan Xing and Liao Hua as his vanguard generals and marched out behind the other two armies.

Now, on the other side, Cao Zhen and Sima Yi were at the rear of their army, overseeing its retreat. They had sent scouts to check the passage at Chencang, and they reported back that there were no signs of Shu forces coming this way. Another 10 days passed, and the men they left behind as an ambush now caught up and said that they had not seen any enemy troops either.

Cao Zhen said to Sima Yi, "All the rain has washed out the gallery road. How can the enemy know that we are on the retreat?"

But Sima Yi told him, "The enemy will come soon."

"How do you know that?"

"The weather has been clear for days and the Shu forces have not given chase," Sima Yi explained.

"They must have expected an ambush. That's why they allowed us to go. But once our army has moved out, they will go take Qi Mountain."

But Cao Zhen wasn't buying it, so Sima Yi decided to make it interesting.

"I expect that Zhuge Liang will come through both the Ji (1) and Xie (2) Gorges. Let's each take one gorge and keep watch over the mouth of the canyon. If no enemy forces appear within 10 days, then I will put on makeup and women's clothing and come to your camp to answer for my offense."

Well now, that would be something to see, especially for Cao Zhen, who's had to endure watching Sima Yi foil Zhuge Liang's previous invasions, something that Cao Zhen repeatedly failed to do. So he was totally game for a wager.

"If the Shu forces really do come, then I will give you a jade belt and a fine horse that the emperor bestowed upon me," he told Sima Yi.

So they had a bet, and they split their forces. Cao Zhen led one army and waited at the mouth of Xie Gorge to the west of Qi Mountain, while Sima Yi waited by the mouth of Ji Gorge to the east of the mountain.

Sima Yi led one battalion of his men into the valley to set up an ambush, while the rest set up camp along key roads. Sima Yi then went incognito, mixing in with some of his men to inspect his camps. At one of the camps, he heard an officer complaining out loud, "We've been rained on all this time, and yet he still doesn't want to go home. And now we're stuck here, suffering because of his bet."

Well, when Sima Yi returned to camp, he assembled the officer corps and called out the whiner.

"The court maintains its army for a thousand days for a single day's use," Sima Yi said sternly. "How dare you complain and hurt the men's morale?!"

This whiner said, who, me? I didn't whine. But Sima Yi summoned a witness, and soon the whiner had nothing to say.

"I am not trying to win my bet," Sima Yi said. "I am trying to defeat the enemy so that you all can return home in glory. How dare you complain and bring punishment upon yourself?!"

And with that, Sima Yi had the guy dragged outside and beheaded. When his head was brought back into the tent, it put everybody else on notice, and Sima Yi told them, "Pay attention and be on guard against the enemy. When you hear the sound of explosives from the center of the army, that is your signal to attack."

Meanwhile, one of the Shu armies, 20,000 men led by the generals Wei Yan, Zhang Yi (2), Chen (2) Shi (4), and Du (4) Qiong (2), was marching toward Ji Gorge. As they were traveling, they got a visit from one of Zhuge Liang's advisers, Deng (4) Zhi (1).

"I have instructions from his excellency," Deng Zhi told them. "If you march through Ji Gorge, you must be on the lookout for an enemy ambush. Do not advance rashly."

But the general Chen Shi (4) scoffed.

"His excellency worries too much. The enemy has been rained on so much that their clothes and armor have been destroyed. They are in a hurry to fall back. They won't think to leave an ambush. If our troops march on the double, victory will be ours. Why is he telling us to stop?"

Deng Zhi replied, "His excellency's plans always work. How dare you disobey his orders?"

But Chen Shi (4) just laughed and said, "If his excellency was so smart, he won't have lost Jieting."

Well, that remark got Wei Yan going as well. He now remembered how Zhuge Liang shot down his idea for cutting through the mountains and making a sneak attack on Chang'an. So he now joined in on the wisecracking.

“If his excellency had listened to me and taken the route I suggested, we would have taken Luoyang by now, much less Chang’an,” he snarked. “And now he insists on going through Qi Mountain. What’s the point? First he orders us to advance, and now he’s telling us to not advance. His commands are unclear!”

Emboldened by Wei Yan, Chen Shi now said, “I’ll take 5,000 men and go through the gorge and pitch camp at Qi Mountain. We’ll see how embarrassed his excellency will be then!”

Deng Zhi tried time and again to talk him out of this, but Chen Shi refused to listen and went off with his 5,000 men. So all Deng Zhi could do was to rush off to tell Zhuge Liang.

So Chen Shi and his troops marched out of the gorge, but they hadn’t gone far when suddenly, at the sound of an explosive, enemy soldiers sprang out from all around. Chen Shi quickly turned and fell back, but the mouth of the gorge was now filled with Wei soldiers and they surrounded him. Chen Shi tried to break out, but could not.

Just then, though, loud cries rose up as another army charged into the fray. This was Wei Yan, coming to Chen Shi’s rescue. The two of them managed to break through and make it back inside the gorge, but of the 5,000 soldiers that Chen Shi brought with him, only four or five hundred wounded men returned. Their comrades Du (4) Qiong (2) and Zhang Yi (2) now came to back them up and chase off the pursuing Wei forces. Only now did Chen Shi and Wei Yan see the wisdom in Zhuge Liang’s warning and regret not listening to him.

Meanwhile, Deng Zhi had returned to Zhuge Liang and told him how much smack Wei Yan and Chen Shi were talking about him behind his back. Zhuge Liang smiled and said, “Wei Yan has always rebelled against authority. I know he is often discontent. I keep him around because of his valor, but in the long run, he will be trouble.

Just then, scouts rushed in with the urgent report that Chen Shi had lost more than 4,000 men and was now garrisoned back inside the gorge with a few hundred wounded. Zhuge Liang sent Deng Zhi to go console Chen Shi so as to make sure he didn't get any ideas about going rogue after disobeying orders and failing miserably.

He then summoned the generals Wang Ping and Ma Dai and told them, "If there are Wei forces defending Xie Gorge, lead your units across the hills. Travel only at night. Make it out to the left side of Qi Mountain as quickly as you can and then start a fire as the signal."

He then instructed the generals Ma Zhong and Zhang Yi (4), "Take the backroads and travel by night to the right of Qi Mountain. There, start a fire as a signal and join up with Ma Dai and Wang Ping to attack Cao Zhen's camp. I will launch a third attack from within the gorge, and we will defeat the enemy."

Once those four generals left, Zhuge Liang summoned Guan Xing and Liao Hua and whispered secret instructions to them and sent them off. He then personally led an army of crack troops and marched on the double. Along the way, he handed out more secret instructions to the generals Wu Ban and Wu Yi (4) and sent them on ahead with some troops.

Meanwhile, Cao Zhen was just taking it easy, confident in his belief that the Shu forces weren't coming. In fact, he even told his men to take it easy over these next 10 days, after which, he was sure, he would be treated to the sight of Sima Yi in drag. Before he knew it, seven days had flown by. But suddenly, his men reported that they spotted a small number of Shu soldiers trickling out of the valley. So Cao Zhen sent his lieutenant to take 5,000 men and go check it out and make sure no enemy soldiers got close to camp. So the lieutenant went, and as soon as he approached the mouth of the valley, he saw the enemy soldiers falling back. So the Wei forces gave chase, but after about 20 miles, they lost sight of the Shu soldiers.

Feeling suspicious, the lieutenant ordered his men to halt and catch their breath. Suddenly, scouts came back and said they spotted an enemy ambush up ahead. And sure enough, they saw a giant dust cloud kicking up from the hills. Momentarily, loud cries rose up all around. From in front charged a force led by the Shu generals Wu Ban and Wu Yi. From behind came Guan Xing and Liao Hua. And the Wei forces were hemmed in on the left and right by the hills, so there was nowhere to run. On the hills, the Shu soldiers were shouting, "Those who surrender will not be killed!" Hearing that, most of the Wei soldiers promptly surrendered. Cao Zhen's lieutenant held out and put up a fight, but Liao Hua cut him down with one swing of the saber.

So that was a nice victory for Zhuge Liang, but that was just the first piece in his elaborate scheme. He now stashed the captives in the rear of his army but took their uniforms and put them on 5,000 of his own men. He then sent the generals Guan Xing, Liao Hua, Wu Ban, and Wu Yi to lead this army and head toward Cao Zhen's camp. They sent someone on ahead to tell Cao Zhen that his lieutenant had only found a few enemy foot soldiers and that they had already withdrawn. Cao Zhen was delighted, and just then, word came that Sima Yi sent his confidant to see him.

Cao Zhen summoned the messenger, and the guy said, "Commander Sima used an ambush to kill 4,000 enemies. He sent me to caution you, commander. He said to not worry about your wager and be on guard."

Cao Zhen, however, said, "I haven't seen a single Shu soldier here," and he sent the messenger back to Sima Yi.

Momentarily, word came that his lieutenant had returned, and Cao Zhen went outside his tent to welcome him. But no sooner had he set foot in his camp did word come that both the front and the back of the camp was on fire. Cao Zhen rushed to the rear of the camp. Just then, the four Shu generals leading the army in disguise charged in from the front. Meanwhile, the two armies that Zhuge Liang had

sent to swing around to both sides of Qi Mountain crashed in through the back of the camp. The Wei forces were caught totally off guard since, oh yeah, their commander told them to just chill. So now, they all just ran for their lives, and Cao Zhen did the same under the protection of his officers while the Shu forces gave chase.

As he was running, more loud cries suddenly rose up as another army darted out. Cao Zhen went oh crap oh crap! But lucky for him, this was Sima Yi, coming to his rescue. Sima Yi managed to fight off the pursuing enemy troops. So Cao Zhen to escape with his life, but he left his dignity behind.

Sima Yi now told Cao Zhen, "Zhuge Liang has the geographical advantage; we cannot stay here long. Let's move our camp to the shores of the River Wei (4) and plan our next move."

"How did you know I would meet with such a calamity?" Cao Zhen asked.

Well, because you're an idiot? Of course, Sima Yi didn't say that. Instead, he replied, "When your messenger told me that you hadn't seen a single Shu soldier, I suspected Zhuge Liang was coming to raid your camp, so I came to back you up. Turns out I was right. But let's say no more of our wagger and just focus on serving the country."

Well, as it turns out, Cao Zhen wasn't really up for that either. He fell ill from the combination of the fright and humiliation he just suffered, and he became bedridden. And once their army had pitched camp along the Wei River, Sima Yi did not dare let Cao Zhen continue to command the troops because he didn't want them to see him in his present state and lose heart.

While things were looking dire for the Wei forces, Zhuge Liang was on the move, marching his troops out through the Qi Mountain again before stopping to reward them for the victory. Just then, the one army that did not fare well, the one that lost because the generals Wei Yan and Chen Shi (4) decided to disobey Zhuge Liang's orders. So now, Zhuge Liang wanted to know who was responsible, even though he already knew.

Wei Yan spoke up first and said, “Chen Shi disobeyed orders and rushed through the mouth of the canyon. That’s what led to the defeat.”

Chen Shi shot back and said, “Wei Yan told me to do it!”

But Zhuge Liang said to Chen Shi, “Wei Yan saved you, and yet you’re trying to shift the blame to him. You have violated orders; no deceit can save you!”

And with that, Zhuge Liang had the guards drag Chen Shi outside and chop off his head, which was then hung up in front of the tent to put everyone else -- especially Wei Yan -- on notice.

Zhuce Liang now turned his attention to the army’s next move. Just then, his spies reported that Cao Zhen was bedridden and was recuperating in his camp. This news delighted Zhuge Liang. He told his officers, “If Cao Zhen’s illness is not serious, then he would be going back to Chang’an to recover. Right now, his army is not on the move. That means his illness must be serious. That’s why he’s staying in the army to keep their men’s minds at ease. I’ll write a letter and have our captives deliver it to him. When he reads it, he will die for sure!”

And so he summoned the prisoners he took when he defeated Cao Zhen’s lieutenant. He told them, “You are all Wei soldiers. Most of your families are in the Heartlands. It’s not good to keep you in the Riverlands for long. How about if I send you all home?”

The prisoners were so touched by this act of mercy that they wept and prostrated to thank Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang told them, there’s just one thing you need to do for me.

“Commander Cao and I had an agreement. I have a letter for him. If you bring it to him, he will no doubt reward you handsomely.”

So the Wei soldiers gladly delivered the letter to Cao Zhen. When he heard that he got mail from Zhuge Liang, Cao Zhen propped himself up in bed and opened the letter. It said:



“A letter from Zhuge Liang, the prime minister of the Han and the Marquis of Wuxiang (3,1), to Chief Commanding Officer Cao Zhen: I presume to think that whoever commands other men must be able to engage and disengage, to show flexibility as well as firmness, to advance and to retreat, to be gentle as well as tough. He must be harder to shake than the very hills, deeper to fathom than the yin and yang that govern nature, enduring as heaven and earth, inexhaustible as the capital granary, limitless and vast as the four seas, and brilliant as the seven celestial bodies. He must know the weather augured by the stars. He must recognize when terrain is safe. He must understand the timing of military engagements. He must sense the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy.

What a pity for you unlearned youngin’s who defy the very heavens by helping a traitor usurp the throne! Now he proclaims himself emperor in Luoyang! We drove your ruined forces from Xie Gorge, and the rains at Chencang caused you great suffering. Frustrated on land and on the rivers, your troops lost all discipline and strewed their weapons and armor outside the city. The field marshals lost their nerve, and their commanders scuttled off in disarray. How will you hold up your heads before the elders in the land within the passes, or bring yourselves to enter the hall of y our chief minister?

What the historians will record with the brush, the people shall spread afar with their many tongues. They will say that Sima Yi was watchful and nervous before battle, but Cao Zhen was fearful and hesitant at the first sign of war. Our troops are tough, our horses hardy, and our commanders possess the fierce energy of tigers and the mobile power of dragons. We will sweep you clear out of the northwest and then go on to purge the kingdom of Wei and leave it a wilderness!

When Cao Zhen finished reading this letter, he could feel the anger swelling up in his chest until he couldn’t breathe. And he died that very night. If you’re keeping track, Zhuge Liang has now killed a man with his tongue and another with his pen.

Seeing that Cao Zhen was dead, Sima Yi shipped his body back to Luoyang for burial. When the emperor Cao Rui heard that Cao Zhen was dead, he sent orders to Sima Yi, telling him to hurry up and fight. So Sima Yi brought his army to go meet Zhuge Liang and sent over a letter challenging Zhuge Liang to battle.

“Cao Zhen must be dead!” Zhuge Liang told his men when he received the letter. He then wrote back to Sima Yi, “See you tomorrow.” Once the messenger left, Zhuge Liang handed out secret instructions to the officers Jiang Wei and Guan Xing.

The next day, Zhuge Liang moved out all his forces from his camp at Qi Mountain and marched to the shore of the Wei River. Between the river and the hills laid a flat plain that was perfect for two armies to cut each other to pieces. The two sides met and set up their lines. After the prerequisite drumming, Sima Yi rode out from the Wei side, followed by his officers. He saw across the line Zhuge Liang seated atop his chariot, a feather fan in his hand.

Sima Yi shouted across the line, “My lords draw legitimacy from the ancient rituals of the sage kings Yao and Shun.” And by the way he’s referring to that whole ceremony where the last Han emperor, umm, graciously, and totally voluntarily, abdicated the throne to Cao Pi. Anyway, he continued, “My lord’s family’s reign has now spanned two emperors. We control the Heartlands. It’s only because of my lord’s immense compassion that he has tolerated the kingdoms of Shu and Wu so as not to hurt the common people. You are a country bumpkin. You do not recognize the will of heaven and insist on invading our territory. You deserve to be destroyed. If you mend your ways and go home now, we can each defend our own borders and coexist. The people will avoid calamity, and you all will get to live!”

Zhuge Liang laughed and replied, “The First Emperor entrusted his heir to me, so how can I not do everything I can to bring rebels to justice?! The Cao clan will be exterminated by the Han soon enough. Your ancestors were all servants of the Han and received their kindness for generations. But instead of

thinking about how you can repay that kindness, you are helping to usurp the throne. Have you no shame?!”

Well, as it turns out, Sima Yi apparently did have shame, quite a lot of it actually, and he felt it on this occasion. But the two sides were already lined up, so there had be some action.

“Let the two of us duke it out,” Sima Yi said to Zhuge Liang. “If you win, then I swear I will no longer be commander! If you lose, then you must go home right away, and I will not do you further harm.”

Zhuce Liang replied, “Do you want to have a contest of generals? Of armies? Or of formations?”

Sima Yi chose formations, so Zhuge Liang told him to go first. So Sima Yi went to the command tent, took a yellow flag to direct his army, and lined his men up in a formation. He then rode back out to the front of the lines and asked Zhuge Liang, “Do you recognize my formation?”

“Even the lowest officer in my ranks knows how to deploy this formation,” Zhuge Liang laughed. “This is called the Beginning of Form.”

Ok, fine, I’ll give you that one, Sima Yi said. He then challenged Zhuge Liang to set up a formation of his own. Zhuge Liang went into his lines, waved his feather fan, and his men moved into position. He then exited the formation and asked Sima Yi if he recognized it.

“It’s the Formation of the Eight Hexagrams; of course I recognize it,” Sima Yi scoffed.

“But do you dare to come attack it?” Zhuge Liang asked, upping the ante.

“Since I recognize it, why would I not dare to attack it?”

Zhuce Liang told him to help himself, so Sima Yi returned to his own lines and summoned three generals: Dai (4) Ling (2), Zhang (1) Hu (3), and Yue (4) Chen (1). The formation had eight entrances. Sima Yi told his generals to enter the formation from a specific entrance, fight their way westward, and then exit through the north entrance.

So the three officers each led 30 riders and charged into the formation just as Sima Yi instructed. But as soon as they entered, they found themselves lost and unable to break free. They tried to head

southwest like Sima Yi told them to, but a hail of arrows sent them back. The formation had so many layers and so many gateways that they couldn't tell which way was which. Now, they were just stumbling around like chickens with their heads cut off. All they saw were brooding clouds that struck fear in their hearts and a dense mist that closed in on them. One after another, every single Wei soldier was captured, bound, and brought to the main tent.

Zhuge Liang was seated in the tent, and the three Wei generals and their 90 men were all bound and forced to kneel in front of him. Zhuge Liang now rubbed salt in the wound.

"Capturing you was nothing at all," he said with a smile. "I will release you. Go back and tell Sima Yi to brush up on his military texts and pay greater attention to his tactics. Then he can come back and have another contest with me. But, even though we can spare your lives, you have to leave your weapons and horses."

But Zhuge Liang took more than just the men's weapons and horses. He took their dignity, too. He had them all stripped, painted their faces with black ink, and forced them to walk back across the lines on foot.

The sight of his officers returning in such humiliation infuriated Sima Yi. Turning to his men, he said, "How can we go home and face the officials at court after such a disgrace?!" He then directed his army to fight to the last. He himself wielded his sword and led 100 some officers to direct the charge.

But just as soon as the two armies collided, the sound of drums and horns blared out from behind Sima Yi's lines. Amid earth-shattering cries, an army charged in from the southwest, led by the Shu general Guan Xing. Sima Yi quickly directed his rear column to fend them off. But no sooner had he done that did his army fall into chaos. Another Shu army, this one led by Jiang Wei, was attacking. So the Wei forces were now under attack on three sides. Sima Yi quickly ordered a retreat and his army managed to fight their out, but not before suffering 70 percent casualties. Picking up the tattered remains of his army, Sima Yi now pitched camp on the south shore and refused to come out.

So that's another victory for Zhuge Liang. To see what trick he'll pull out of his hat next, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!