

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 69.

Last time, we left off with Cao Cao celebrating the completion of construction on his pleasure palace, the Bronze Bird Tower, by throwing a huge party. At this party, he held an archery competition among his officers, with the winner taking home a fancy battle cloak. A bunch of his generals showed off their skills, but one, Xu Huang, appeared to have won the cloak by shooting the branch from which the cloak hanged.

Cao Cao was just about ready to declare Xu Huang the winner, and Xu Huang assumed as much because he had already grabbed the cloak. But just then, another general, Xu (2) Chu (3), rode forward and yelled, "Where are you going with that cloak?! Leave it for me, now!"

"The cloak is mine; why are you trying to take it by force?!" Xu Huang asked.

Xu Chu didn't even bother to answer. He just galloped toward Xu Huang and tried to wrestle the cloak away, forgetting the whole concept of an archery competition, where you actually have to, you know, shoot an arrow and hit something before you can claim the prize.

When the two got close enough, Xu Huang raised his bow and tried to hit Xu Chu, but Xu Chu grabbed the bow with one hand and pulled Xu Huang from his saddle. Xu Huang quickly let go of the bow and leaped off his horse. Xu Chu did likewise, and the two of them started to engage in some good ol' fashioned fisticuffs. Cao Cao quickly told his men to separate the two, but by then, the cloak had already been torn to smithereens. So, way to go, guys.

Cao Cao summoned both generals to the upper tier of the tower where he sat. Both of them were looking royally pissed off at each other and were itching to go at it again. Cao Cao, however, smiled and said, "My aim in holding the contest was to witness your prowess. What is a mere cloak worth?"

So he summoned all of his officers up to the tower and bestowed upon each of them a bolt of fine silk from the Riverlands, a region known for its silk. The music and merrymaking then kicked off as military and civil officials took turns offering toasts.

Cao Cao now said to the civil officials, "The military officers have showed off their skills through their riding and archery. You gentlemen are all learned scholars. Since you are all gathered here, why don't you each write a piece to commemorate this occasion?"

So all the civil officials fetched ink and brush and each composed an essay on the spot. This kind of impromptu essay-writing was the kind of thing that Chinese scholarship and imperial entrance exams were made of, so these guys were in their element. Soon, Cao Cao was presented with one essay after another, most of which praised his accomplishments and virtue to the hilt and hinted that he should maybe, you know, accept the mandate of heaven and take the throne for himself.

After reading all the essays, Cao Cao smiled and said, "Sirs, you heap too much praise upon me. I am but a simple and crude man. When I began my career, I was cited for my filial devotion and integrity. Then, when chaos engulfed the realm, I built a retreat about 15 miles east of the fief at Qiao (2), with the intention of spending my springs and summers reading and my falls and winters hunting, and waiting until peace has been restored to the land before I return to public life.

"But beyond my wildest expectations, the court appointed me as a commandant for military standards, so I abandoned my life as a recluse and dedicated myself to achieving distinction by ridding the country of rebels. My life's wish was for my epitaph to read, 'Here Lies the Late Lord Cao, the Han General Who Conquers the West.' Since I declared war on Dong Zhuo and wiped out the Yellow Turbans, I have gradually restored peace to the land, eliminating Yuan Shu (4), defeating Lü Bu, exterminating Yuan Shao, and pacifying Liu Biao. In becoming prime minister, I have risen as high as

an official possibly can. What greater ambition could I have? If not for me, who knows how many people would have declared themselves emperors or kings.

“Some people, seeing my great power and drawing unwarranted conclusions, suspect me of harboring imperial ambitions. That is preposterous. I am ever mindful of Confucius’ admiration for King Wen’s (2) ‘Ultimate Virtue’. I have never forgotten his words. I long only to relinquish control of the army and return to being just the lord of my fiefdom. But that is impossible. I fear that as soon as I give up my military power, I would be murdered. If I die, the country would be imperiled. I cannot invite such certain calamity merely for the sake of my reputation. Gentlemen, I don’t think any of you really understand me.”

A quick aside is in order as I explain the historical reference that Cao Cao made to “King Wen’s Ultimate Virtue (2).” He was referring to King Wen, the founder of the Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou was a vassal kingdom to the house of Shang (1). Toward the end of the Shang Dynasty, the Zhou was growing in power and had control of two-thirds of the realm. King Wen, however, steadfastly refused to overthrow the Shang out of his sense of loyalty to that house. This was the “ultimate virtue” that Confucius and Cao Cao referred to. Of course, after King Wen died, his son said “The heck with this” and toppled the Shang to officially start the Zhou Dynasty.

Upon hearing Cao Cao’s little spiel, everyone in attendance rose to their feet, bowed, and said, “Even Yi (1) Yin (3) and the Duke of Zhou (1) are not the equal of your excellency!”

So the historical references just keep on coming. Yi Yin was the first prime minister of the Shang Dynasty, and I introduced you guys to him way back in supplemental episode 1. He helped found the Shang Dynasty and then served as a powerful regent for a young king. The young king was

misbehaving, so Yi Yin at one point sent him into extended exile until he had learned his lesson, but Yi Yin never tried to take the throne for himself, even though he easily could have.

The other figure referenced, the Duke of Zhou, had a similar story. So we met King Wen (2) of Zhou just now. The Duke of Zhou was King Wen's fourth son, and his second eldest brother became king after their father's death. This was the king that overthrew the Shang Dynasty. After this king died, the Duke of Zhou became regent for his nephew. Again, here was a guy who held immense power and could have easily usurped the throne but never did, so he was forever praised for such a virtuous act.

In effect, then, Cao Cao's staff was comparing him to China's equivalents of Cincinnatus, men who had absolute power but were never tempted by it and gave it up willingly. Except, of course, in this case, Cao Cao was saying that, "Hey, I'd LOVE to give up my power, but I can't. I'm so important to the country's survival that it would endanger the empire if I did."

A later poet commented thusly:

Once the Duke of Zhou feared the slander of the world;

Once Wang (2) Mang (3) treated scholars with respect.

What if they had perished then, misjudged,

Their chronicles forever incorrect?

So ok, one more historical reference here. I promise this is the last one for a while. Wang Mang was a court official at the end of the Western Han (4) Dynasty, and he was basically the opposite of the great regents that we just met. Instead of refusing to fall to the temptation of power, Wang Mang usurped the throne from the House of Han, ending the Western Han Dynasty. His run started out well enough and he was pretty popular with Confucian scholars because he tried really hard to adhere to

Confucian principles in the way he governed, but things went downhill pretty quickly, and his reign only lasted 14 years before he was overthrown and his dynasty replaced by the Eastern Han. Not surprisingly, Wang Mang went down in history as one of its greatest villains, traitors, and usurpers.

So the poet is pointing out that at one point in their lives, one of China's most virtuous men and one of its most villainous figures had very different reputations than how they were ultimately remembered. Or to quote Bob Dylan, "Don't speak too soon, for the wheel is still in spin." So how will Cao Cao be remembered? Stay tuned.

For now, though, Cao Cao was more focused on having a good time and celebrating the opening of his pleasure palace. He drank and drank and drank, and soon was pretty drunk. He then told his men to bring brush and ink so that he could pen a poem he was calling -- what else? -- Bronze Bird Tower Poem.

But before he was done with writing the first character, he received this message: Dongwu has sent the envoy Hua (2) Xin (1) to the capital to recommend Liu Bei as the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province. Furthermore, Sun Quan has married his younger sister to Liu Bei. Oh, and there's more. Most of the nine districts along the River Han (4) now belonged to Liu Bei.

When he heard this, Cao Cao fell into such a panic that the brush fell from his hand. One of his advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), saw this and asked, "Your excellency never once lost your nerve while leading tens of thousands of men into the face of slings and arrows in the heat of battle. Why does the news of Liu Bei taking Jing Province alarm you so?"

"Liu Bei is a dragon among men," Cao Cao replied. "He just had not had a taste of water, that's all. Now that he has captured Jing Province, it's like an imprisoned dragon breaking free into the ocean. How can I not be alarmed?"

"Do your excellency know why Dongwu sent Hua (2) Xin (1) here?" Cheng Yu asked.

“No.”

“Sun Quan is actually wary of Liu Bei and wants to attack him. But he is worried that your excellency would use the opportunity to make a move. So he sent Hua (2) Xin (1) here as an envoy to recommend Liu Bei. His intent is to put Liu Bei’s mind at ease and dash your excellency’s designs on the Southlands.”

“You’re quite right,” Cao Cao said as he nodded.

“I have a plan that can push Sun Quan and Liu Bei into conflict,” Cheng Yu continued. “Then your excellency can capitalize on the opportunity and defeat both of them in one fell swoop. The person that Dongwu relies on is Zhou Yu. Your excellency can recommend that the emperor appoint Zhou Yu as the governor of Nanjun, appoint his second-in-command Cheng Pu as the governor of Jiangxia, and keep the envoy Hua Xin as a high official at court. Zhou Yu and Liu Bei would then no doubt become each other’s nemesis, and we can make a move while they are at each other’s throats.”

“Your words match my thoughts exactly,” Cao Cao said. So he summoned Hua Xin onto the Bronze Bird Tower and rewarded him handsomely. After the party broke up, Cao Cao led his staff back to the capital Xuchang, where he doled out the appointments to Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu, while keeping Hua Xin at the capital as the junior minister of justice.

Cao Cao then sent a messenger to Dongwu to bestow the appointments upon Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu. I should point out that while they were now officially the governors of Nanjun and Jiangxia, two of the most important strategic locations in Jing Province, those appointments were really in name only, since those cities were currently in Liu Bei’s hands.

Now that he is technically in charge of those cities, Zhou Yu wanted to be actually in charge as well. And there’s still that whole vendetta from the two times Zhuge Liang outsmarted and humiliated

him. So he sent a letter to Sun Quan, asking him to send Lu Su to see Liu Bei and demand the return of Jing Province.

So Sun Quan said to Lu Su, "You once vouched for Liu Bei when he 'borrowed' Jing Province. But he still hasn't returned the territory to us. What's he waiting for?"

"The paperwork clearly states that he will return it as soon as he has taken the Riverlands," Lu Su answered.

But Sun Quan got upset when he heard this reply. "He said he was going to take the Riverlands, but he still hasn't mobilized his troops. How long must we wait?!"

Faced with the wrath of his lord, Lu Su volunteered to go talk to Liu Bei again. So he hopped on a boat and headed to Jing Province.

Meanwhile in Jing Province, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang have been busy stockpiling grain, organizing troops, and recruiting many talented men from near and far. One day, they got word that Lu Su was there to see them.

"Why has he come?" Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang.

"Recently, Sun Quan recommended your lordship for the post of the imperial protector of Jing Province," Zhuge Liang said. "But that was just a ploy to keep Cao Cao on guard. Cao Cao then appointed Zhou Yu the governor of Nanjun to spur us and Dongwu to try to gobble each other up while he capitalizes on the opportunity. Lu Su must be here because Zhou Yu wants Jing Province back again after his new appointment."

"So how do we respond?" Liu Bei asked.

"If Lu Su mentions Jing Province," Zhuge Liang said, "your lordship should start wailing. When you have cried enough, I will step out to console you."

Their gameplan in place, Liu Bei welcomed Lu Su into his residence and offered him a seat.

“Imperial uncle, since you are Dongwu’s son-in-law, you are now my master, too. How dare I sit?”

Lu Su said.

“My friend, we go way back. No need to stand on ceremony,” Liu Bei said with a smile.

So Lu Su took his seat and tea was served. After that, he got down to business.

“I have come on my lord’s command specifically about Jing Province. Your lordship have borrowed this territory for a long time and haven’t returned it yet. Since we are now all family, for the sake of our ties, we would like for you to return it to us soon.”

When Liu Bei heard this, he covered his face and started to wail.

“My lord, why are you crying?” a surprised Lu Su asked. But Liu Bei gave no answer and just kept crying nonstop.

After sufficient tears had been shed, Zhuge Liang stepped out from behind the screen and said to Lu Su, “I have heard everything. My friend, do you know why my lord cries?”

“No.”

“It’s not hard to figure,” Zhuge Liang explained. “When my lord borrowed Jing Province, he promised that he would return it once he has taken the Riverlands. But then when you think about it, Liu Zhang (1), the ruler of the Riverlands, is my lord’s kinsman. They are both flesh and blood of the house of Han. If my lord invades his kinsman’s territory, people would curse and spit upon his name. But if he doesn’t, where would he go once he has returned Jing Province to you? If he doesn’t return Jing Province, then it would not look good to his brother-in-law, your master. He’s caught between a rock and a hard place; that’s why he’s crying his heart out.”



After he finished explaining, Zhuge Liang tried to console Liu Bei, but that just egged on Liu Bei even more and he beat his chest, stamped his foot, and cried even louder, to the point where even Lu Su tried to console him.

“Imperial uncle, please do not let this trouble you so,” Lu Su said. “Let’s discuss this with Master Zhuge.”

“My friend,” Zhuge Liang said to Lu Su, “Might we trouble you to return to Lord Sun and explain our difficulties to him and beg him to allow us a little more time?”

“But what if he refuses? What then?” Lu Su asked.

“He has married his own sister to my lord, so why would he refuse?” Zhuge Liang said. “I hope you will put in a kind word for us.”

Well, Lu Su, being the kind-hearted sucker that he was and faced with this no-doubt-sincere display of sadness from Liu Bei, had no choice but to oblige them. Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang thanked him, treated him to a feast, and then saw him off. On his way back, Lu Su stopped off at the city of Chaisang (2,1) to see Zhou Yu and tell him what happened.

“You’ve fallen for Zhuge Liang’s tricks again!” Zhou Yu said as he stamped his foot. “Back when Liu Bei was serving under Liu Biao, he already harbored intentions of swallowing his territory, so what’s Liu Zhang to him? You’re going to be in trouble if you do as they suggested. But I have an idea that even Zhuge Liang will not see through. I just need you to make another trip.”

“Please do tell,” Lu Su said.

“You don’t need to go see our lord. Instead, go back to Jing Province and tell Liu Bei, ‘Since Sun and Liu are now connected by marriage, then we’re all family. If he cannot bring himself to go take the Riverlands, then Dongwu will. Once we have conquered the Riverlands, we will give it to him as dowry, but he must return Jing Province to us.’ ”

“But the Riverlands are far away and cannot be easily taken,” Lu Su said. “I’m not sure if your plan will work.”

“[Laugh] My friend, you really are an honest man,” Zhou Yu laughed. “You think I’m really going to take the Riverlands for him? I’m just using that as a cover. My real intent is to take Jing Province, but I want to catch him off his guard. To reach the Riverlands, the army of Dongwu must travel past Jing Province. At that time, we can ask Liu Bei for provisions, and he would no doubt come out to reward our troops. We will use that opportunity to kill him and take Jing Province to soothe my anger and resolve your dilemma.”

Lu Su was delighted by Zhou Yu’s idea, so he headed back to Jing Province. When Liu Bei heard that Lu Su was back, he consulted with Zhuge Liang.

“Lu Su must not have gone to see Sun Quan, but instead went to Chaisang to concoct a scheme with Zhou Yu to trick us,” Zhuge Liang said. “Whatever he says, if you see me nodding, then just agree.”

So they invited Lu Su in, and he told them, “Lord Sun had nothing but praise for the imperial uncle’s great virtue. So he talked it over with his officers and will mobilize his troops to take the Riverlands for you. Once he has conquered the Riverlands, he will give it to you as dowry in exchange for Jing Province. But when our troops pass through here, he hopes you can supply them with some money and provisions.”

When Zhuge Liang heard this, he nodded at once and said, “All praise Lord Sun’s kind heart!”

Liu Bei also bowed to Lu Su and said, “This must be all thanks to your kind words.”

“When your great army arrives, we shall journey far from our city to greet them,” Zhuge Liang added.

When Lu Su heard this, he was secretly celebrating, and he took his leave after the requisite feasting.

Once Lu Su left, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang what this was all about. Zhuge Liang laughed and answered, "Zhou Yu's end must be near if he's resorting to such shallow schemes that even a child could see through!"

Well, Liu Bei apparently was not smarter than a fifth grader, because he had to ask Zhuge Liang to elaborate.

"This is the ruse of "Pretending to pass through on the way to conquering Guo (2)," Zhuge Liang explained.

And I need to hit the pause button and explain what that means. This is a reference to something that happened back in the Spring and Autumn Period. One of the big kingdoms of the time, Jin (4), wanted to attack a rival kingdom named Guo (2), but to get to Guo (2), the Jin (4) army would have to pass through the neighboring kingdom of Yu (2). So the Duke of Jin (4) promised the Duke of Yu (2) some fine swag if he would let the Jin army pass through his territory on their way to attacking Guo (2). The Duke of Yu (2) agreed. Jin managed to conquer Guo, but on their way back, while passing through the territory of Yu, the Jin army suddenly attacked their unprepared ally and conquered Yu as well. So you see the relevance to our situation here.

"Dongwu claims to be going to conquer the Riverlands, but their intent is to take Jing Province," Zhuge Liang continued. "When your lordship goes out to reward the Dongwu army, they will take you hostage and storm into the city. They're trying to catch us with our pants down."

"So what do we do?" Liu Bei asked.

“Don’t worry. Just remember that “it takes a hidden bow to catch a fierce tiger and an irresistible lure to hook a giant turtle.” When we are done with Zhou Yu, even if he isn’t dead, he will go away more dead than alive.”

Liu Bei was delighted by this assurance, and Zhuge Liang then summoned the general Zhao Yun to give him instructions.

When Lu Su went back to see Zhou Yu and told him how Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang were delighted by his suggestion that Dongwu would take the Riverlands for them, Zhou Yu laughed out loud and rejoiced.

“They have fallen for my scheme at last!”

He then told Lu Su to go report to Sun Quan and tell the general Cheng Pu to lead an army as backup. By now, Zhou Yu’s old arrow wound had gradually healed and he was feeling pretty good. So he started mobilizing his troops. He appointed the general Gan Ning as the vanguard, while he himself headed up the second squad with the officers Xu (2) Sheng (4) and Ding (1) Feng (4). The generals Ling (2) Tong (3) and Lü (3) Meng (2) headed up the rear. They mobilized 50,000 troops and headed toward Jing Province. Along the way, Zhou Yu was so giddy at the thought that he had finally pulled one over on Zhuge Liang that he couldn’t help but laugh time and again.

When the vanguard reached the key location of Xiakou (4,3), Zhou Yu asked if there was anyone from Jing Province waiting for them, and the answer came that Liu Bei had dispatched the adviser Mi (2) Zhu (2). Zhou Yu summoned him and asked how the preparations were going for the welcome reception that Liu Bei was supposed to be holding.

“My lord has prepared everything,” Mi Zhu answered.

“Where is the imperial uncle now?” Zhou Yu asked.

“At the gates of Jing Province, waiting to offer you a toast, commander.”

“We are marching a great distance for your lord’s sake, so he must not take the welcoming of our troops lightly,” Zhou Yu said. Mi Zhu reassured him and then took his leave.

Zhou Yu’s navy pressed ahead, with one warship after another dotting the river. When they approached the city of Gong’an (1,1), they did not see any of Liu Bei’s ships or people there to welcome them. Zhou Yu ordered his fleet to keep going. When they were a few miles away from Jing Province, there was still nothing on the river. Scouts also reported back that only two white flags sat atop the walls of Jing Province, with no sign of anyone.

All of this made Zhou Yu suspicious. He told his fleet to move near shore, where he disembarked, mounted his horse, and led 3,000 troops toward Jing Province.

When they arrived at the foot of the city, they saw no movement whatsoever. Zhou Yu pulled up his horse and told his men to call for the gates to be opened. From atop the city, someone asked who was there.

“Commander Zhou of Dongwu is here in person!” Zhou Yu’s men replied.

Before they had finished speaking, a signal sounded from atop the city wall, and in the blink of an eye, the walls were lined with armed soldiers. From the command tower the general Zhao Yun emerged and asked, “Commander Zhou, what brings you here?”

“I am going to take the Riverlands for your lord. How can you not have heard?!” Zhou Yu answered.

“Master Zhuge saw through your ruse of ‘Pretending to pass through on the way to conquering Guo (2),’ ” Zhao Yun replied. “That’s why he stationed me here. As for my lord, he wants me to relay this message: ‘Liu Zhang and I are both members of the house of Han. How can I bear to turn my back

on honor and take the Riverlands? If Dongwu does indeed conquer the Riverlands, then I shall let my hair hang loose and retire to the mountains instead of betraying the trust of the entire country.”

With his scheme having gone bust, Zhou Yu had no choice but to turn around. But just then, one of his men galloped onto the scene and delivered an urgent report: “Four detachments of troops are coming this way, led by Liu Bei’s generals Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Huang (2) Zhong (1), and Wei (4) Yan (2). We don’t know how many men they have, but their battle cries are echoing for miles. They are all shouting ‘Capture Zhou Yu!’ ”

When he heard this, Zhou Yu’s old wound burst open yet again, and with a loud cry, he tumbled off his horse.

To see if Zhou Yu and his men will make it out of this alive, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.