

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 70.

Last time, Zhou Yu, in another bid to take back Jing Province, had told Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang that he would lead the forces of Dongwu to go take the Riverlands to the west and trade that for Jing Province. All he asked from them was to come welcome his troops and give them some provisions when they passed through Jing Province on the way. His real intent, though, was to use that opportunity to kill Liu Bei and take Jing Province. But when Zhou Yu and his men arrived at the foot of Jing Province, they discovered that Zhuge Liang was not fooled for a second. The gates of the city were shut, and four detachments of Liu Bei's troops were closing in, shouting that they were out to capture Zhou Yu alive.

This turn of events reagravated Zhou Yu's old arrow wound, and he let out a loud cry and fell off his horse. His men quickly scooped him up and hustled back to their ships and hightailed it out of there. Just then, to add insult to injury, word came through the ranks that Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang were sitting atop a hill up ahead, having a drink, and enjoying themselves immensely.

This made Zhou Yu gnash his teeth. "You think I can't take the Riverlands?! I swear I will do just that!"

Just as he was seething, his men told him that Sun Quan's younger brother Sun Yü (2) had arrived. Zhou Yu welcomed him in and told him what had transpired. Sun Yü (2) told him that he was there on Sun Quan's orders to lend a hand. So they ordered their troops to press on ahead. But they had not gone far when word came that two of Liu Bei's officers -- Liu Feng (1) and Guan Ping (2) -- had blockaded the river up ahead. This provided even more aggravation for Zhou Yu.

Just then, a messenger arrived bearing a letter from Zhuge Liang, which read:

“From Zhuge Liang, the director general of the Han and imperial corps commander, to Master Zhou Yu, chief commander of Dongwu: Since our parting at Chaisang (2,1), I have missed you immensely. I heard that you intend to conquer the Riverlands, but in my poor opinion, you must not attempt this. The people of Yi (4) Province are sturdy, and its terrain treacherous. Even though Liu Zhang (1) is feeble, he has enough to defend himself. Now your army has embarked on a long campaign, and it will face many uncertainties before securing total victory. Even the greatest military strategists of old would not be able to guarantee the outcome. After his defeat at Red Cliff, how can Cao Cao have ever given up thoughts of revenge? With you going off on a distant campaign, if Cao Cao takes this opportunity to attack, the Southlands would be reduced to dust! I cannot bear to sit by and watch, so I have written you this note, which I hope you will favor with your attention.”

When Zhou Yu finished reading the letter, he let out a long sigh and told his men to fetch brush and ink so he could write a letter to Sun Quan. The letter written, he assembled his officers and told them, “It’s not that I don’t want to do everything I can to repay our state, but my time on earth ends here. You all must serve our lord well and accomplish our grand enterprise.”

When he finished speaking, Zhou Yu lost consciousness. But then he came to again, looked up to the heavens, and lamented, “After you made Zhou Yu, why must you make Zhuge Liang?! After you made Zhou Yu, why must you make Zhuge Liang?!” He repeated this many times, and then he died. Zhou Yu was just 36 at the time.

A poem later remembered Zhou Yu thus:

Glory had crowned this hero since Red Cliff,

From earliest years hailed a champion.

In lute-set song he showed his sense of grace;

With cup in hand he bade his friend farewell.
Three thousand bushels from Lu Su he once begged;
Ten legions took the field at his command.
Baqiu (1,1), now Zhou Yu's final resting place,
Still draws men who mourn in heartfelt grief.

With their commander dead, the Dongwu troops stopped at Baqiu (1,1) and sent Zhou Yu's final letter to Sun Quan. When Sun Quan heard that Zhou Yu was dead, he wept out loud. Sun Quan then opened Zhou Yu's letter, and it said:

"Despite my commonplace skills, I was favored with your confidence and command of your troops. Could I then do any less than strain, with every fiber of my being, to repay your kindness? Alas, the date of our death is never known in advance, and the duration of our lives is always predestined. That my body should succumb before my humble will has produced more fruit overwhelms me with remorse. Right now, Cao Cao resides in the north, and that front is not yet settled. Liu Bei lurks in our land like a tiger being reared. The outcome remains unknown. It is imperative that all members of our court remain vigilant and our sovereign exercises careful judgment. Lu Su is fiercely loyal, serious, and dedicated in all things. He may replace me. They say that a dying man's words are his best. If these words receive your consideration, then I have not died in vain."

The letter brought more tears to Sun Quan's eyes.

"Zhou Yu had the talent to advise kings, but he has died young," Sun Quan said. "Whom shall I lean on now? Since his last will suggested that Lu Su should succeed him, I dare not disobey."

So Sun Quan sent out word for Zhou Yu's body to be transported back to Chaisang for burial, and he immediately promoted Lu Su to chief commander of the army. So yup, Lu Su, the lovable, good-natured, kind-hearted, slow-witted sidekick and butt of jokes, is now in charge of Dongwu's troops. Heaven help us.

While all this was going down, Zhuge Liang was observing the night sky in Jing Province. Upon noticing a general's star crashing to earth, he smiled and said, "Zhou Yu is dead."

The next morning, he reported this to Liu Bei. Liu Bei sent out some spies, and they confirmed the news.

"With Zhou Yu dead, now what?" Liu Bei asked.

"Lu Su will no doubt be the one to replace Zhou Yu at the head of Dongwu's troops," Zhuge Liang said. "Judging from the night sky, many general's stars are clustered in the sky to east. I would like to go to the Southlands, officially to mourn Zhou Yu, but unofficially to search out capable men to help your lordship."

"But Dongwu's officers might want to kill you," Liu Bei said, which was definitely a legit concern.

"Even when Zhou Yu was alive, I was not afraid. So what do I have to worry about now that he's dead?" Zhuge Liang said. He then told the general Zhao Yun to accompany him with 500 soldiers, prepare mourning gifts, and they boarded ships to Baqiu (1,1). Along the way, they got word that Sun Quan had indeed promoted Lu Su to take Zhou Yu's office and that Zhou Yu's body had been returned to Chaisang, so Zhuge Liang headed to Chaisang instead.

When he got there, Lu Su welcomed him with all the proper courtesies. Many of the officers who had served under Zhou Yu indeed wanted to kill Zhuge Liang, but with Zhao Yun following him

everywhere with a sword in tow, no one dared to make a move. And now, Zhuge Liang proceeded to put on one of his finest theatrical displays.

He instructed his men to place their mourning gifts in front of Zhou Yu's altar. He then personally offered up wine, kneeled on the ground, and read the following eulogy. And keep in mind, in the original Chinese, this whole thing was written in four-character lines with rhyme and meter, so it was even more poetic than this translated version:

Alas, my friend! Woefully fallen in your prime!

Heaven numbers our days and leaves man to grieve!

Heartbroken, I spill this flask of wine!

May your spirit savor the libation!

I pay homage to your youth,

Remembering your deep friendship with Sun Ce (4).

You stood for honor and disdained wealth,

and your home to him you did offer.

I pay homage to your early manhood,

when you flexed your wings like the storm-embracing roc,

building a new, strong state,

taking control of the South.

I pay homage to your mature years,

when the fullness of your powers reached Baqiu (1,1),

making Liu Biao uneasy,
spelling relief for your lord.

I pay homage to your style and dignity
when you took the younger Lady Qiao (2) to wife.
Son-in-law to a Han minister,
you did justice to the court.

I pay homage to your bold spirit,
when you argued against tributes for Cao Cao.
Your wings never lowered in submission,
and in the end they flapped even stronger.

I pay homage to your conduct at Poyang,
when Jiang (3) Gan (4) tried your loyalty to persuade.
Self-possession, superb character, lofty ideals --
These were all on display.

I pay homage to your talents,
your administration, and your strategies.
Breaking the foe with fire,
Leading the weak to subdue the strong.

I think back to that time,

your dashing mien and brilliance.

I weep for your untimely demise,

head bowed, heart sore.

Loyal and honorable of mind,

noble in spirit!

A life of three 12-year spans,

a name for a hundred ages.

I mourn, distraught,

my insides knotted with grief.

While a heart beats in me,

this sorrow will not end.

Heaven darkens over,

the army blanches with despair.

Your lord mourns,

your friends pour out their hearts!

I have no talent,

yet you sought my counsel.

We aided the Southlands against Cao Cao,

we supported the Han and its rightful rulers.

With you as the perfect cornerstone
and your perfect dispositions,
what did we have to fear,
what cause had we for vexations?

Alas, my friend!

The living and dead can never meet!

With simple devotion you preserved your integrity,
and it will survive the mists of death and time.

If the dead can discern the thoughts of the living,
then discern the thoughts I am thinking:

No longer under heaven

Will there exist a man who understands me.

Alas, alas, alas!

Partake of this offering!

When he was done eulogizing his buddy, Zhuge Liang threw himself on the ground and wept out loud. Tears of unrestrained grief gushed out like a fountain. When they saw this, the officers of the Southlands remarked to each other, "People always said that Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang were enemies, but watching him deliver this eulogy, that must have been a lie."

When Lu Su saw how grief-stricken Zhuge Liang was, he could not help but feel sadness as well. "Zhuge Liang is a man of such deep feelings," he thought to himself. "[Sigh] Zhou Yu was too narrow-minded and brought on his own death."

And when Zhou Yu saw Zhuge Liang's display in front of his altar, he was no doubt spinning in his casket. Talk about one final slap in the face.

In any case, after the ceremonies, Lu Su held a banquet to thank Zhuge Liang, after which Zhuge Liang took his leave and returned to his ship. Just as he was about to get on board, a man wearing a Daoist robe, a bamboo-leaf hat, a black sash of plaited silk, and plain sandals grabbed him with one hand and laughed.

"You drove Zhou Yu to his death, and now you dare to come eulogize him. You must think Dongwu has no men of talent!"

Zhuce Liang turned to see who this was, and immediately started laughing as well. It was none other than his old friend, Pang (2) Tong (3), aka the Young Phoenix to Zhuge Liang's Sleeping Dragon. The two of them took each other by the hand and went aboard Zhuge Liang's ship to catch up. At the end of their conversation, Zhuge Liang wrote a letter and handed it to Pang Tong.

"I expect that Sun Quan would not make good use of your talents," Zhuge Liang said to his friend. "If you are dissatisfied, you can come to Jing Province and serve Lord Liu with me. He is kind, honorable, generous, and virtuous, and he will put your vast learning to good use."

After that, the two friends parted ways, and Zhuge Liang returned to Jing Province.

Before we get to Pang Tong, let's first lay Zhou Yu to rest, literally. Lu Su escorted his coffin back to Wuhu (2,2), where a tearful Sun Quan received them and wept in front of the casket. Sun Quan then ordered that Zhou Yu be buried with high honors in his native village. Sun Quan also provided handsomely for Zhou Yu's two sons and one daughter.

After those arrangements were taken care of, Lu Su said to Sun Quan, "I am a man of middling abilities. Zhou Yu's recommendation of me is misguided. I am not worthy of my position. I would like

to recommend someone to assist your lordship. He is well-versed in the ways of heaven and earth. His plans and strategies rival the greatest advisers of history. Zhou Yu often took his advice, and even Zhuge Liang respects his knowledge. He is currently residing in the Southlands, so you should give him an important office.”

Sun Quan was delighted and asked whom Lu Su was referring to.

“He is from Xiangyang (1,2), and his name is Pang Tong. His nickname is Master Young Phoenix..”

“I have long heard of him as well,” Sun Quan said. “Since he’s here, please ask him to come see me.”

So Lu Su brought Pang Tong in to see Sun Quan. Now, unlike other wunderkinds like Zhuge Liang or Zhou Yu, Pang Tong was not much of a looker. In fact, he had a rather peculiar appearance. He had bushy eyebrows, a tilted nose, a dark complexion, and a short beard. One look at him, and Sun Quan was already a little put off.

“Sir, what have your studies focused on?” Sun Quan asked.

“Oh, I stick to no particular subject,” Pang Tong answered. “I adapt with the circumstances.”

“How does your knowledge compare to Zhou Yu?”

“My knowledge is quite different from Zhou Yu’s,” Pang Tong replied with a smile.

Now, Zhou Yu was Sun Quan’s favorite adviser, and Sun Quan did not appreciate this subtle putdown of the man he had so trusted. So he basically told Young Phoenix, “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.” Thus snubbed, Pang Tong let out a long sigh and took his leave.

After Pang Tong left, Lu Su asked Sun Quan why he did not give Pang Tong a job.

“He’s an insolent scholar. What’s the benefit of using him?” Sun Quan replied.

“When we fought at Red Cliff, he was the one that devised the scheme of tricking Cao Cao into tying his ships together,” Lu Su said. “His merit ranks among the highest.”

“That was just Cao Cao’s own doing, not necessarily Pang Tong’s work,” Sun Quan said. “I vow that I will never use him.”

Lu Su had no choice but to leave. He found Pang Tong and told him, “It’s not that I did not recommend you, but my lord refuses your service. Please, be patient.”

But Pang Tong simply hanged his head and let out a long sigh.

“Sir, are you thinking of leaving Dongwu?” Lu Su asked.

Pang Tong gave no answer.

“With your talent, you would succeed no matter where you are,” Lu Su pressed. “So please tell me where you intend to go.”

“I want to go serve Cao Cao,” Pang Tong said.

“That would be like throwing a bright pearl into an abyss,” Lu Su objected. “You should go to Jing Province to serve Imperial Uncle Liu Bei. He would no doubt make good use of your skills.”

“That’s actually my real intention. I was merely teasing you just now,” Pang Tong told him.

“I will write a letter recommending you,” Lu Su said. “When you are in the service of Lord Liu, you must help maintain the peace between our two sides so that we may join forces against Cao Cao.”

“That is my life’s ambition,” Pang Tong said.

So Lu Su wrote him the recommendation letter, and Pang Tong set off for Jing Province.

When he arrived at Jing Province, Zhuge Liang happened to be away on an inspection tour. The guards at the door told Liu Bei that Pang Tong was there to offer his service, and since he had long heard of Pang Tong’s name, Liu Bei immediately received him. But when Pang Tong came in, instead of the customary greeting of prostrating on the ground, he merely gave a low bow. So he was already getting off on the wrong foot. And then Liu Bei took one look at his face and had the same reaction that Sun Quan did.

“Your long trip here must have been difficult,” Liu Bei said.

So at this moment, Pang Tong had on him not one, but two letters of recommendation -- one from Lu Su and the other from Zhuge Liang. Either one of these would have likely landed him a nice position in Liu Bei’s operation right away, but instead of showing the letters, Pang Tong simply replied, “I heard that your lordship is recruiting talented men, so I have come to join you.”

“Alas, Jing Province has just recently been stabilized and there aren’t many positions available,” Liu Bei said. “About 40 miles from here, there’s a county that needs a prefect. Might I ask you to subjugate yourself to that post for now. When another position opens up, I will definitely call on you.”

So what Liu Bei just did was basically the equivalent of offering a CEO-caliber talent a job in the mail room, and Pang Tong was a little miffed by this. He thought about showing off his knowledge on the spot, but seeing that Zhuge Liang was not around, he decided, “Ok, fine. I’ll go sort mail for a while and show you.”

So he went to take his office as the prefect of the podunk little county. Now, one might think that he would be inclined to do a kick-ass job to show Liu Bei his skills. But instead, Pang Tong ignored all business and whiled away his days with wine and merrymaking.

When word of this got back to Liu Bei, he was incensed. “How dare that pedant flout my administration?!” he said.

To remedy the situation, Liu Bei decided to send in his brother Zhang Fei. He told Zhang Fei to go inspect the counties in that part of the province and told him that if he found anyone who was flouting the law, then he should look into the matter and dole out punishment on the spot. But of course, Zhang Fei was not exactly well-versed in the matters of administration, so Liu Bei sent the adviser Sun Qian (2) with him.

So Zhang Fei and Sun Qian headed to Pang Tong's county. All the officials came out to welcome them, all except the county prefect. When Zhang Fei asked where he was, someone told him, "Prefect Pang has been in office for 100-some days, but he has not tended to any business. He just spends all day drinking by himself late into the night. He is still passed out drunk in bed right now."

Zhang Fei was irate when he heard this and wanted to go and arrest Pang Tong right away. But Sun Qian checked him.

"Pang Tong is a high-minded man and must not be condemned lightly," Sun Qian said. "Let's go to the prefect's office and question him first. If he really is negligent, then we can punish him."

So off they went to the prefect's office. Zhang Fei sat down in the main hall, where all business was typically conducted, and demanded to see the prefect. Moments later, out came Pang Tong, looking disheveled and a little tipsy.

"My brother thought you were a talented man, so he appointed you to be the prefect here," Zhang Fei said angrily. "How dare you neglect the affairs of the county?!"

"[Scoff] What business have I neglected, general?" Pang Tong asked with a smile.

"You have been in office for more than 100 days, yet you spend all day in a drunken stupor. How is that not negligence?!"

"At a podunk county like this, how much petty business could there be? General, have a seat and watch me take care of it all."

So Pang Tong immediately summoned his staff and told them to bring forth all the cases that had piled up over the last 100 or so days. They brought all the paperwork in, as well as all the plaintiffs and defendants. Pang Tong plowed through the entire caseload, writing down decisions while he announced verdicts, deciding right and wrong in each case with uncanny precision. All the people kowtowed to him to show their reverence for his wisdom.

Within half a day, all the cases that had accumulated since Pang Tong took office were done. Pang Tong tossed his brush to the ground and said to Zhang Fei, "So what was that about neglecting business? I see Cao Cao and Sun Quan as an open book, so what's the big deal with a little county like this one?"

While I'm sure all the people appreciated Pang Tong letting their court cases languish for three months just to make a point, Zhang Fei was stunned by Young Phoenix's brilliance and immediately stood up and said, "Sir, you are a great talent! Forgive my offense. I shall sing your praises to my brother."

Only now did Pang Tong produce the recommendation letter that Lu Su had written.

"Why did you not show this to my brother when you saw him?" Zhang Fei asked.

"If I did, it would have seemed like I was relying solely on the recommendation to beg for a job," Pang Tong said.

Zhang Fei now turned to Sun Qian and said to him, "If not for you, we would have lost a great talent."

So they took their leave of Pang Tong and returned to Jing Province, where Zhang Fei promptly praised Pang Tong to the heavens in front of Liu Bei.

"It's my fault that we have mistreated a great talent like this," a stunned Liu Bei said.

Zhang Fei then handed over Lu Su's recommendation letter, which said:

"Pang Tong has too much talent for petty administration. He should be assigned to government documents or made an assistant to a governor; then he will display his powers. If you judge him by his appearance, you run the risk of ignoring his knowledge, and he will end up in another's service, and that would be a great pity!"

Liu Bei was beating himself up some more upon reading this letter when Zhuge Liang returned from his inspection tour. When he came in, Zhuge Liang inquired, "How has Master Pang Tong been doing?"

"I sent him to administer a small county, and he's been drinking and neglecting business," Liu Bei answered.

Zhuce Liang smiled and told him, "Pang Tong is not one for petty administration. His knowledge is 10 times mine. I gave him a recommendation letter. Did he show it to you?"

"I just got Lu Su's recommendation letter today, but I have not seen yours."

"When a great talent is placed in a petty role, he will tend to lose himself in wine and neglect his tasks," Zhuge Liang said.

"If not for brother Zhang, I would have almost lost a great talent," Liu Bei said.

So Liu Bei sent Zhang Fei to go fetch Pang Tong and bring him back to Jing Province, where Liu Bei stepped down from his seat to welcome him and apologize. Only now did Pang Tong produce the letter that Zhuge Liang had written, which told him that when Pang Tong came to offer his services, he should be given a high post. Well, better late than never.

"Sima Hui (1) once told me, 'Of Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix, if you get either one, you can restore peace to the land.'" Liu Bei said. "Now I have both of you. The house of Han will most assuredly be reinvigorated."

So Pang Tong got a nice big promotion from county prefect to deputy director general and imperial corps commander, which meant he and Zhuge Liang were essentially partners in making all strategic decisions and preparing the army for battle.

Word soon reached the capital Xuchang that Liu Bei now has Zhuge Liang and Pang Tong as his strategists, and that he has been recruiting troops, buying horses, stockpiling provisions, and building an alliance with Dongwu, and it looked like it was a matter of when, not if, he was going to launch a northern expedition. When Cao Cao heard this, he assembled his strategists to discuss a preemptive strike against the South.

“With Zhou Yu’s recent death, we should attack Sun Quan first, and then Liu Bei,” his adviser Xun (2) You (1) suggested.

“But if I go on a distant campaign, I am worried that Ma (3) Teng (2) would attack the capital,” Cao Cao said. “When we were previously at Red Cliffs, there were rumors of exactly that happening. We must guard against it.”

“In my humble opinion, we should send out an imperial edict promoting Ma Teng to the General Who Conquers the South and order him to attack Sun Quan,” Xun You said. “We can use that pretext to lure Ma Teng to the capital and eliminate him. Then we can march South without any lingering concerns.”

To see whether Ma Teng falls for this trick, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.