

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 75.

Before we pick up from where we left off, I'd like to remind you to give the show a rating or review in iTunes or whatever podcasting app you are using. Of course, if you've been following the show for 75 episodes, I'm guessing you've already done that. But just in case you haven't, please consider taking a minute to do so, as it helps others discover the podcast.

Alright, so last time, Zhang (1) Song (1), an official serving under Liu Zhang (1), the ruler of Yi (4) Province in the Riverlands, had volunteered to go to the capital to dissuade Cao Cao from having any designs on the region. But in reality, Zhang Song was planning to offer the Riverlands to Cao Cao because he thought Liu Zhang was weak and undeserving of such a prized piece of real estate. Zhang Song even brought along a map of the region containing all the key information one would need to plan an invasion.

However, Zhang Song got a rude reception from Cao Cao, thanks in no small part to Zhang Song's own rude and arrogant display. Cao Cao threatened to kill him before letting him off with a beating. Thus snubbed, Zhang Song was slinking back to the Riverlands when he got it into his head that, "Hey, if I can't betray my lord to Cao Cao, maybe I can betray him to Liu Bei."

Funny enough, Liu Bei had the same thought at the same time, and he rolled out the red carpet for Zhang Song, welcoming him with great ceremony and humility, just to show his admiration for the man, of course. But while they feasted for three days in Jing Province, not once did Liu Bei so much as mention the Riverlands.

On the fourth day, it was time for Zhang Song to go, and Liu Bei saw him out. No, not out of the house or out of the neighborhood or out of the city. Liu Bei escorted Zhang Song several miles outside the city and held a feast there to see him off.

Offering a toast to his guest, Liu Bei said, "I'm deeply grateful that you spent three days with us. But after our parting today, who knows when I would once again receive the benefit of your wisdom?"

As he spoke those words, Liu Bei began to tear up. Seeing this, Zhang Song thought to himself, "Liu Bei is so magnanimous and humane, and such a lover of talented men. How can I pass him over? I should convince him to take the Riverlands."

So Zhang Song said to Liu Bei, "I have long wished to be of service to you, but regrettably have not had the chance. In my view, Jing Province is no place to stay long term, what with Sun Quan in the east like a tiger poised to strike, and Cao Cao in the north with the appetite of a whale."

"I am aware of that," Liu Bei said, "but I haven't found a secure place to call home." Hint hint.

"Yi (4) Province is protected by formidable geographic barriers," Zhang Song said. "It possesses hundreds of miles of fertile soil. The people are thriving and the state is prosperous. The learned men of the region have long admired your virtue. If you mobilize the army of Jing Province and march westward, you will establish your hegemony, and the house of Han will be revitalized."

"I dare not do such a thing," Liu Bei said. "Liu Zhang is a fellow member of the imperial house and has long bestowed his benevolence on the region of Shu (3). How can another displace him?"

"I am not trying to betray my master for glory," Zhang Song said. "But having met an enlightened lord like you, I must pour out my heart to you: Liu Zhang may possess Yi Province, but he is feeble and cannot make use of talented men. Besides, Zhang Lu (3) in the north has often entertained thoughts of invading. The people's support is wavering and they are praying for an enlightened master. My original intent on this trip was to offer the province to Cao Cao, but that traitor resorts to deceit and disdains the worthy. So I came to see your enlightened lordship. You should take the Riverlands first as your foundation, then move north to take the region of Hanzhong (4,1), before conquering the heartland and setting the dynasty to rights. Your name would go down in history, and your

accomplishment would be unrivaled. If your lordship is interested in taking the Riverlands, then I am willing to do what I can and serve as your inside man. What do you think?"

This was, of course, exactly what Liu Bei had been waiting for. But instead of jumping at the offer, he had to maintain appearances, what with his "Kindness and Honor" PR campaign and all.

"I am deeply grateful for your generous offer, but Liu Zhang is my kinsman. If I attack him, I worry that everyone would curse my name."

"A true man should strive for great accomplishments," Zhang Song said. "Apply the whip and take the lead! If you don't take the Riverlands now, you will regret it when someone else does."

So the ethical dilemma of attacking the Riverlands has been addressed, sort of. But Liu Bei now voiced logistical concerns.

"I have heard that the road into Shu is so hilly and rough that carriage and horse must travel in single file. Even if I want to take it, how can I go about doing so?"

At that, Zhang Song pulled out the map he had been holding on to this whole time and handed it to Liu Bei.

"Only after having tasted your great virtue am I bold enough to offer you this map. It will guide you to Shu."

Liu Bei took a glance and realized that this was basically the third century version of Google Maps, complete with information about topography, distances, key intersections, dimensions of the roads, and strategic points like where grain and money are stored.

"My lord, you should make your move quickly," Zhang Song pressed Liu Bei. "I have two friends and confidants. One is named Fa (3) Zheng (4), and the other Meng (4) Da (2). They will definitely be able to help. When and if they come to Jing Province, you may discuss this with them."

Liu Bei clasped his hands in a gesture of gratitude and said, "As sure as the hills stay green and the river ever runs, you, sir, shall be greatly rewarded."

"Having found an enlightened lord, I had no choice but to tell you everything," Zhang Song replied. "How can I dare to expect repayment?"

And with that, Zhang Song bade Liu Bei and company goodbye, and Zhuge Liang ordered Guan Yu to escort him for another dozen miles or so before turning back.

Once Zhang Song made his way back to Yi Province, he first went to see his friend Fa (3) Zheng (4) and told him all about how rude Cao Cao was and how wonderful Liu Bei turned out to be and oh, by the way, I have already promised our province to Liu Bei.

"I know Liu Zhang is useless and have long wanted to meet the imperial uncle," Fa Zheng replied. "Since we are of one mind, there is no cause for doubts."

Momentarily, their buddy, Meng (4) Da (2), also arrived. When he walked in and saw his two friends huddled together whispering to each other, Meng Da said, "I know what you're up to. You're planning to give away Yi Province, right?"

"Indeed," Zhang Song answered. "Can you guess whom we want to give it to?"

"None but Liu Bei would do," Meng Da said. At that the three of them clasped their hands and laughed.

After they had a good laugh over betraying their master, they got down to figuring out exactly HOW they were going to do that.

"When you see Liu Zhang tomorrow, what will you say?" Fa Zheng asked Zhang Song.

"I will recommend that he send the two of you as envoys to Jing Province," Zhang Song said, and his friends agreed this was the way to go.

So the next day, Zhang Song went to see Liu Zhang to report on his trip. When Liu Zhang asked how it went, Zhang Song said, "Cao Cao is a traitor to the Han. His lust for power is unspeakable, and he already harbors thoughts of taking the Riverlands."

"So what can we do about it?" Liu Zhang asked.

"I do have one idea that would ensure neither Zhang Lu (3) nor Cao Cao would dare to encroach on the Riverlands lightly."

"What is it?"

"Liu Bei in Jing Province is the imperial uncle and your lordship's kinsman. He is benevolent, magnanimous, and kind, with the aura of an honest and respectable man. Why don't we ally with him and have him help us repel Cao Cao and Zhang Lu?"

"I've been thinking about that for a long time, too," Liu Zhang said. "Who can serve as our envoy?"

"None but Fa Zhang and Meng Da would do."

So Liu Zhang summoned the two and wrote a letter. He appointed Fa Zheng as the envoy and sent him off first to lay the groundwork for the alliance. He then ordered Meng Da to lead 5,000 crack troops to welcome Liu Bei into the Riverlands.

So everything was going exactly as Zhang Song and company had planned when suddenly, someone stormed in from outside with sweat rolling down his face and shouting, "My lord! If you listen to Zhang Song, then our province will soon belong to someone else!"

A stunned Zhang Song looked and saw that this was an official named Huang (2) Quan (2), who was currently serving as first secretary.

"Liu Bei and I are kinsmen, so I am reaching out to family for help. Why do you say such a thing?" Liu Zhang asked.

“I have long heard that Liu Bei treats people with kindness and how his gentle approach has overcome the hardest resistance that the empire’s finest heroes have put up,” Huang Quan answered. “He possesses the allegiance of the people, the strategies of Zhuge Liang and Pang Tong, and the strengths of the likes of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Huang Zhong, and Wei Yan. If you bring him to our land and treat him as a subordinate, how long do you think he would be willing to comply? And you cannot treat him as a guest, for one country cannot tolerate two masters. Take my advice, and Shu (3) will be as secure as Mount Tai (4). Ignore my words, and your position shall become as precarious as a pile of eggs. Zhang Song passed through Jing Province on his way back; he must be conspiring with Liu Bei. You should execute him first, then refuse Liu Bei, and the Riverlands will be saved.”

“But how will we resist if Cao Cao or Zhang Lu invade?” Liu Zhang asked.

“We can close off the roads, fortify our defenses, and wait it out,” Huang Quan (2) said.

“Enemy troops are encroaching on our borders. The situation is urgent,” Liu Zhang retorted.

“Waiting it out is too slow a plan.”

And so Liu Zhang ignored Huang Quan’s advice and was about to dispatch Fa Zheng when an aide, Wang (2) Lei (4), also spoke up against it.

“No, no, no!” Wang (2) Lei (4) said. “If your lordship listen to Zhang Song, you are inviting disaster!”

“Not so,” Liu Zhang said. “I am allying with Liu Bei to repel Zhang Lu.”

“Zhang Lu’s encroachment is a superficial concern,” Wang Lei said. “But if Liu Bei enters the Riverlands, he would become a vital threat. Liu Bei is a hero of the times. When he served under Cao Cao, he plotted to assassinate him. Then, when he joined Sun Quan, he ended up stealing Jing

Province from him. How can we coexist with such treachery? If you bring him here, the Riverlands will be doomed!”

But Liu Zhang had just about enough of all this doom and gloom prognostication.

“No more of this nonsense!” he scolded the naysayers. “Liu Bei is my kinsman; how can he bear to take what is mine?”

And with that, Liu Zhang ordered his men to remove the two naysayers and then told Fa Zheng to set out on his diplomatic mission. So Fa Zheng headed off to Jing Province, where he met with Liu Bei and offered up the letter from Liu Zhang. The letter said:

“Your cousin, Liu Zhang, respectfully commends the following to the attention of elder kinsman General Liu Bei. Long have I esteemed your lofty name, but the difficult roads of Shu have prevented me from sending tribute. For this, I feel the deepest shame. As the saying goes, ‘Share trouble, bear trouble.’ This goes for friends, not to mention kinsmen. Right now, Zhang Lu’s army encroaches our northern borders and makes me feel uneasy. So I have sent this earnest petition for your consideration. I hope that, for the sake of our common ancestry and to preserve honor among brothers, you would lead an army immediately to rid us of these marauders. We shall forever be connected to each other, like lip and teeth, and you will be handsomely rewarded. This letter cannot convey all my thoughts. I eagerly await your arrival.”

Liu Bei was delighted by this letter, and he welcomed Fa Zheng with a banquet. After a few rounds of wine, Liu Bei dismissed all the attendants and whispered to Fa Zheng, “I have long heard of your great name, and Zhang Song also sang your praises. Today, I can fulfill my lifelong wish of receiving your instruction.”

“I am but a lowly messenger from Shu; I do not deserve such praise,” Fa Zheng said. “I have heard it said that when horses encounter one who recognizes their worth, they whinnie; when men encounter one who understands them, they are willing to sacrifice everything. Are you still interested in what Zhang Song proposed before he took his leave of you?”

“I have often lamented my lifelong status as a guest in someone else’s house,” Liu Bei told him. “Even little wrens keep a branch for themselves and cunning hares keep three burrows, to say nothing of man. It’s not that I am not interested in the fertile lands of Shu, but Liu Zhang is my kinsman, so how can I bear to make a move against him?”

“Yi Province is a heavenly state, and a ruler who cannot keep control will not last there,” Fa Zheng countered. “Liu Zhang is inept at using talent, and this territory will soon belong to someone else. Right now, it’s yours for the taking, and you must not let this opportunity go by. As the saying goes, ‘He who gets to the rabbit first wins the chase.’ If you want to take this territory, then I shall risk my life to help you.”

Now, this is where you would think Liu Bei would stand up, kick over his table, and make a decisive display of his conviction to take the Riverlands so as to win over Fa Zheng completely. But instead, he just clasped his hands in a gesture of gratitude and said, “Please allow us to talk it over.”

After the feast ended, while Zhuge Liang personally escorted Fa Zheng back to his guest house, Liu Bei sat alone, lost in his thoughts. Pang Tong, aka Master Young Phoenix, came in and asked, “Only a fool remains indecisive when a decision is called for. My lord, you are a wise man, so why the second thoughts?”

“What do you think we should do?” Liu Bei asked.

“Jing Province borders Sun Quan to the East and Cao Cao to the North, making it difficult to establish yourself here. Yi Province has millions of households, vast territories, and ample riches to



support a grand enterprise. With Zhang Song and Fa Zheng helping us on the inside, we have a heaven-sent opportunity. What need is there for hesitation?"

"But the one who is my antithesis is Cao Cao," Liu Bei countered. "Where his means are hasty, mine are temperate. Where he is cruel, I am humane. Where he is shrewd, I am loyal. I must be his polar opposite in all things in order to succeed. I cannot bear to betray the trust of the realm for some small gain."

So Liu Bei's plan to political success was basically to set himself up as the non-Cao Cao alternative, something along the lines of "Hey, vote for me because that other guy is just pure evil, and I stand for everything that he's not." Pang Tong, however, reminded him that, hey, you're not exactly trying to win an election in a democracy during a time of relative peace here.

"My lord," Pang Tong said with a smile, "that may be a high-minded ideal, but in a time of chaos and strife, where might makes right, there is no high road to follow. If you cling to principle at every turn, you will not be able to take a single step. Instead, you should be flexible. You know, 'incorporate the feeble and attack the incompetent, to take power untowardly, but hold it virtuously,' as great conquerors of old did. When things are settled, you can treat Liu Zhang honorably by giving him a big fiefdom. What trust would you have betrayed then? If you don't take the Riverlands now, someone else will eventually. Think about it, my lord."

This bit of Machiavellian advice brought Liu Bei to his senses. "This invaluable advice shall be inscribed upon my heart!" he told Pang Tong. Also, if anyone asks, you twisted my arm and made me do it, ok?

So Liu Bei immediately invited Zhuge Liang to the party, and the three of them discussed how to proceed.

“Jing Province is a critical territory and we must leave troops here to defend it,” Zhuge Liang said.

“Then I will go to the Riverlands with Pang Tong and the generals Huang Zhong (1) and Wei Yan,” Liu Bei said. “Master Zhuge, you can remain here with Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun to defend Jing Province.”

Zhuce Liang agreed, and so it was settled. He would remain in Jing Province. Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun were each put in charge of a strategically important area of the region. Meanwhile, Liu Bei appointed Huang Zhong to lead the vanguard and Wei Yan to head up the rear, while he himself led the center of his army, accompanied by his adopted son Liu Feng (1), Guan Yu’s adopted son Guan Ping (2), with Pang Tong serving as his director general -- basically, the top military strategist.

As Liu Bei’s army of 50,000 was just about to head west, an old face showed up, and this is a guy that we haven’t met since waaaaay back in episode 33. When Guan Yu left Cao Cao’s service to rejoin Liu Bei, he came across a group of bandits led by a man named Liao (4) Hua (4), who was a former Yellow Turban rebel. Liao Hua was a great admirer of Guan Yu’s and wanted to join him, but Guan Yu, on account of the man’s less-than-stellar background, declined. That was a decade and 42 episodes ago. I guess Liao Hua figured it was time to try again, so he led a squad of men to come join up with Liu Bei. This time, he found a much better reception, as Liu Bei took him in and sent him to go help Guan Yu keep an eye on Cao Cao. And Liao Hua, as it turns out, is going to be around for a long, long time, and he will eventually become a key role player in Liu Bei’s forces. But we’ll get to all of that in due time.

For now, let’s follow Liu Bei westward. It was winter in the year 212, and his army was marching toward the Riverlands. They had not gone far when they met up with Meng Da, who was leading an army to welcome Liu Bei and accompany him into the Riverlands on Liu Zhang’s orders. Of course, remember that Meng Da was also one of Zhang Song’s confidants and collaborators in the plan to

betray the Riverlands into Liu Bei's hands. So everything was proceeding exactly as they had drawn it up.

Liu Bei now sent word on ahead to Yi Province to tell Liu Zhang that he was on his way. Liu Zhang then sent word to all the towns and cities along the way, instructing them to provide Liu Bei's forces with money and provisions when they passed through. Liu Zhang himself was planning to go to the city of Fucheng (2,2) to welcome Liu Bei, so he gave the order to prepare some splendid carriages, tents, flags, and armor for the occasion. But some of his officials did not share his enthusiasm.

First up was Huang Quan (2), the first secretary who had previously advised against inviting Liu Bei to the Riverlands at all. He now went to see Liu Zhang and told him, "My lord, if you go, you will die by Liu Bei's hand. I have been in your service for many years and cannot bear to see you fall victim to a vicious scheme. Please reconsider!"

But Zhang Song countered this by saying, "Huang Quan's words sow discord among kinsmen and aid our enemies. Such advice is worthless."

As he did before, Liu Zhang again ignored Huang Quan's pleas. "My mind is made up, how dare you keep opposing me?!" he chided Huang Quan.

But Huang Quan now did the thing that ancient Chinese officials love to do to a) demonstrate their conviction in their opinions, and b) put their masters on the spot. He kowtowed so hard that his head began to bleed, and he even crawled forward and clenched Liu Zhang's robes with his teeth, like a loyal dog trying to pull its master back from danger.

Liu Zhang was incensed by this display, and probably more than a little weirded out. He stood up and tried to pull his robes away, but Huang Quan would not let go. When Liu Zhang gave his robe a hard tuck, he broke off two of Huang Quan's front teeth, so Liu Zhang probably now had Huang Quan's blood on his clothes, which is just, yeah, thanks man. Liu Zhang just about had it with this guy by now, so he told the guards to kick Huang Quan out. Huang Quan went away weeping.

Well, now that we got that unpleasantness taken care of, let's get on the road and ... aww, what now?!

"My lord, if you don't listen to Huang Quan's loyal advice, you will bring doom upon yourself!" another man shouted.

This guy was an official named Li (3) Hui (1). He bowed and said, "As the saying goes, 'A lord benefits from heeding his minister's warning, as a father does from his son's.' You must listen to Huang Quan's faithful words. If you allow Liu Bei into the Riverlands, it would be like welcoming a tiger into your house."

"Liu Bei is my kinsman; why would he harm me? Anyone else who speaks against this will be executed!" Liu Zhang said. He then had Li Hui removed as well.

And just in case all the officials' words were starting to make Liu Zhang question his course of action, Zhang Song reassured him he was doing the right thing.

"All the officials in Shu are looking out more for their own families than for your lordship," he told Liu Zhang. "All the generals are full of themselves and harboring ulterior motives. Without the imperial uncle on our side, we would be under siege from inside and out, and we would be done for."

"Sir, your advice is of great benefit to me," Liu Zhang said, which, yeah, let's check back on that in a few episodes and how well that's going to work out.

The next day, Liu Zhang got on his horse and was riding toward the city gates to begin his journey, but word soon came that his aide Wang Lei (4), another guy who was vehemently against bringing Liu Bei into the fold, had suspended himself on a rope high above the city gate. He was holding a written protest in one hand and a sword in the other, and he let it be known that if Liu Zhang did not heed his warnings, he would cut the rope and fall to his own death.

Faced with more theatrics from uncooperative officials, Liu Zhang was like, fine, let's see your written protest. And here's what it said:

“Wang Lei (4), an aide in Yi Province, weeps blood while appealing in all sincerity: It is said that good medicine is bitter to the tongue but good for the illness, while loyal advice is harsh on the ear but good for one's conduct. Back in the Warring States period, King Huai (2) of Chu (3) refused to listen to his adviser Qu (1) Yuan (2) and went to a conference at Wu (3) Pass. He ended up being imprisoned by the kingdom of Qin (2). Now, your lordship is rashly leaving a stronghold to welcome Liu Bei at Fucheng (2,2). I fear that this would be a one-way trip. But if you would execute Zhang Song in public and refuse an alliance with Liu Bei, then it would be a boon to all the people of Shu and to your lordship's enterprise as well!”

When Liu Zhang read this, he was outraged, which is understandable considering that he was probably still trying to get the other guy's blood out of his clothes from the day before, so you can imagine how little patience he had left for such shenanigans.

“I am meeting with a humane and benevolent man, a kindred spirit of noble intent. Why do you insult me time and again?!”

So Liu Zhang just called Wang Lei's bluff. What's Wang Lei going to do about that? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!