

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 81.

Last time, we left off with Zhuge Liang about to face off against Zhang Ren, the commander of the Riverlands troops guarding Luocheng, the city that Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei were besieging. The two sides squared off on the battlefield, but Zhuge Liang came out with a sorry-looking bunch of soldiers. Seeing this, Zhang Ren did not hesitate and ordered his men to charge.

As soon as they did, Zhuge Liang quickly abandoned his carriage, hopped on a horse, and led his ragtag bunch back across Golden Goose Bridge. Zhang Ren pursued him across the bridge, but as soon as he was across, he could see Liu Bei charging forth from the left and the general Yan Yan sweeping in from the right.

Recognizing that he had fallen for a ruse, Zhang Ren tried to turn back, but lo and behold, the bridge had already been taken apart, which is an impressively efficient feat by another of Liu Bei's generals, Zhao Yun, who had orders to wait until Zhang Ren was across and then tear up the bridge. What's more, Zhao Yun and his men now guarded the shore, which made Zhang Ren think twice about fleeing back that way. So instead, he fled south along the river.

Before he had gone but a couple miles, though, he ran into another ambush. The generals Wei Yan and Huang Zhong sprang out of the reeds with 1,000 men each. Wei Yan's men stabbed at Zhang Ren's riders with long spears, while Huang Zhong's men slashed at the legs of their horses with knives. It was a disaster for Zhang Ren's cavalry, and when the infantry behind them saw the cavalry disintegrate, no one dared to go forward.

Zhang Ren was now left with just a few dozen riders as he headed toward the back roads in the hills. But Zhuge Liang had foreseen this, too, and Zhang Ren soon ran smack dab into Zhang Fei. Zhang Ren had nowhere to go, and Zhang Fei's men swooped in and took him prisoner. Meanwhile, the

general leading the back of Zhang Ren's troops saw what was happening and decided that now was a very good time to switch loyalties, so he surrendered to Zhao Yun.

Once everyone returned to camp, Liu Bei first rewarded the guy who surrendered, and then had Zhang Ren brought into the tent.

"All the generals in the region of Shu have seen which way the wind is blowing and surrendered," Liu Bei said to him. "Why don't you do the same?"

But unlike his former comrades, Zhang Ren did not bow.

"How can a loyal official serve two masters?!" he shouted as he glared at Liu Bei.

"You are blind to heaven's will," Liu Bei told him. "If you surrender, I will spare your life."

"Even if I submit today, I will not remain submissive for long!" Zhang Ren shot back. "You should execute me quickly!"

Despite this, Liu Bei could not bear to kill the man. But Zhang Ren refused to give him an easy out, as he cursed loudly at Liu Bei until eventually, Zhuge Liang said enough was enough and told the guards to take him outside and grant him his death wish. Liu Bei lamented having to kill such a loyal man and ordered that he be buried next to Golden Goose Bridge. And honestly, despite all their rhetoric about loyalty, of all the guys in the Riverlands, Zhang Ren was pretty much the only one who chose death over surrender. A poet later complimented him thus:

No constant man consents to serve two lords;

Loyal and brave, he died a deathless death.

Now he shines like the heavens' circling moon,

Lighting up the city of Luocheng beneath.

Having knocked out the enemy's top commander, Liu Bei now turned his attention to the city. The next day, he ordered all the former Riverlands officers who had surrendered to him to go to the foot of the city and shout, "Open the gates and surrender now, and save the entire city from suffering!"

Atop the city walls, the top remaining commander, Liu Gui (1), rained down insults on the turncoats. One of those targets of his insults, the general Yan Yan, was just about to shut him up with an arrow when suddenly, an officer on the city walls pulled out his sword and cut down Liu Gui. This guy, it turns out, was a general named Zhang (1) Yi (4), and he was one of two generals who had been sent to reinforce the city's defenses, which was rather ironic since the other guy surrendered to Liu Bei yesterday, and now Zhang Yi just handed the city to the enemy.

Liu Bei did not hesitate to accept this fine gift, as he led his troops into Luocheng. The guy who was theoretically leading the defense of the city, Liu Zhang's son Liu Xun (2), managed to slip out through the west gate and ran back to daddy.

Having conquered the city, Liu Bei first put out notices to restore calm among the civilians and then rewarded his men. With Luocheng in his hands, Chengdu was his for the taking. But instead of heading toward Chengdu immediately, Zhuge Liang suggested that they first spend some time pacifying the outer districts of the region. So they sent Zhao Yun and Zhang Fei, each leading a couple of the recently surrendered generals, to go lay down the law in the outer regions before they turned their attention to Chengdu.

Meanwhile in Chengdu, Liu Zhang's son told dad about what had transpired on the front lines, and Liu Zhang fell into a panic. He asked his staff for ideas, and one aide offered up this idea:

"Even though Liu Bei has sacked cities and conquered territory," the aide said, "he still doesn't have many troops, nor does he have gained the adherence of the officials and the people. He feeds his soldiers wild grain, and his army has no supply train. Why don't we relocate all the people in the

region to west of the Fu (2) River and burn all their stored food supply and the grain in the field. Then we can dig in and wait them out by refusing to give combat. Without supplies, they will have to leave within 100 days. That will be our opportunity to attack them and capture Liu Bei.”

Now, this scorched-earth tactic can be quite effective. Just ask Napoleon about his invasion of Russia. But Liu Zhang did not have the constitution for it.

“We cannot do that,” he said. “I have only ever heard of resisting the enemy to protect the people, never dislodging the people to prepare for the enemy. This is not the way to ensure our safety.”

Just then, a messenger arrived bearing a letter from Fa Zheng, an official who used to serve Liu Zhang but was among the initial trio of conspirators who schemed to deliver the Riverlands to Liu Bei. The letter said:

“Only recently was I charged with building our friendship with Liu Bei. Little did I expect that the opposition of those around your lordship would bring us to this point. But Liu Bei remains mindful of our longstanding enmity and your bond of kinship with him. If your lordship would reverse course and submit, I am sure you would be treated most generously. We pray you will reflect and make your wishes known.”

When Liu Zhang read these words, he became incensed and shredded the letter, cursing, “Fa Zheng, you ungrateful wretch! You would betray your lord for glory!” He then threw the messenger out of the city while dispatching two guys to lead an army of 30,000 to defend Mianzhu (2,2), a key city that laid between Liu Bei’s army and Chengdu.

While this army set off for Mianzhu, the governor of Yi (4) Province also suggested to Liu Zhang that he should ask for help from Zhang (1) Lu (3), the ruler of the neighboring region of Hanzhong

(4,1). Now, in case you've forgotten, this Zhang Lu was kind of the whole reason that Liu Bei was invited to the Riverlands in the first place. There was some longstanding beef between him and Liu Zhang, and he was thinking about invading Liu Zhang's territory, which prompted Liu Zhang to seek outside help.

The irony was not lost on Liu Zhang, and he said, "There has long been bad blood between Zhang Lu and me, why would he be willing to help me?"

"Even though there is bad blood, with Liu Bei entrenched at Luocheng, the situation is dire," the governor of Yi Province said. "If the lip dies, the teeth will feel cold. If we explain that threat to Zhang Lu, he will help us."

The expression, "If the lip dies, the teeth will feel cold" means that if your neighboring kingdom falls, yours will not be far behind. This reasoning convinced Liu Zhang to send an envoy to the region of Hanzhong.

Now, in Hanzhong, we are going to run into an old friend in Ma (3) Chao (1), the valiant young warrior who waged war on Cao Cao to avenge his father but was defeated back in episode 73. After his defeat, Ma Chao fled to the region of Longxi (3,1) and dropped out of the story. Time flies when you're not in the narrative, because all that happened more than two years ago, so let's see what has happened since then to bring Ma Chao into Hanzhong. And to do that, I must regrettably blitz you with a slew of new character names who will only be in our narrative for half an episode. There's just no way to tell the story without using names to set them apart.

After fleeing to Longxi, Ma Chao stayed with the Jiang people, the borderline tribe that his family had been on good terms with since forever. After two years, he had forged strong enough ties with the Jiang to convince them to help him launch attacks against the various towns and cities of the region, which were under Cao Cao's control. Everywhere they went, the enemy surrendered, until

they reached the city of Jicheng (4,2). There, Ma Chao could not sack the city, but he kept the heat on and continued to besiege the city.

The governor of Jicheng (4,2) sent one urgent dispatch after another to ask for help from Xiahou Yuan, the general that Cao Cao had left in charge in the city of Chang'an to keep an eye on the region. But Xiahou Yuan did not dare to mobilize his troops without an ok from Cao Cao. After a while, the situation at Jicheng became dire, and the city's governor discussed with his staff whether they should surrender to Ma Chao.

His military adviser, Yang (2) Fu (4), wept and pleaded, "Ma Chao is a traitor. How can we surrender to him?"

However, the governor turned a deaf ear to his protests and flung open the city gates to welcome Ma Chao. But he was in for a nasty little surprise. Ma Chao came into the city alright, but he didn't exactly accept the surrender.

"You're only surrendering because the situation is dire," Ma Chao told the governor angrily. "Your heart is not sincere!"

So Ma Chao proceeded to have the governor executed, but he didn't stop there. He also had the man's entire family, all 40-some people, executed as well. While he was on this killing spree, someone told him that hey, that military adviser Yang (2) Fu (4) was advising the governor to not surrender. You should kill him, too. But Ma Chao said no.

"Yang Fu remained true to his honor; I must not kill him," Ma Chao said. In fact, not only did he not kill Yang Fu, he kept him on as military adviser. Yang Fu then recommended two men to Ma Chao. One was named Liang (2) Kuan (1), and the other named Zhao (4) Qu (2). Ma Chao made both of them officers.

One day, Yang Fu told Ma Chao, "My wife has passed away in the city of Lintao (2, 2). I would like to ask for two month's leave. I will return after I have buried her."

Ma Chao agreed to this, and so Yang Fu set off. On the way, he stopped in at the city of Licheng (4,2) to pay a visit to the general there, a man named Jiang (1) Xu (4) who was his cousin. Yang Fu entered Jiang Xu's home and paid his respects to his aunt, who was 82 years old.

Yang Fu wept and told her, "I am ashamed to face you, my aunt. I could not protect my city, nor could I die with my master. The rebel Ma Chao killed our governor, and all the people of the province despise him. Yet, my cousin sits and watches from here with no desire to bring him to justice. That is not the way of a servant of the emperor."

As he spoke, Yang Fu cried so bitterly that from his eyes flowed not tears, but blood. When his aunt heard his words, she summoned her son Jiang Xu (4) and admonished him, telling him that he was complicit in the governor's death. But she didn't exactly take it easy on Yang Fu either.

"You have already surrendered to another man and enjoys his benevolence, so how can you entertain thoughts of turning against him?" she said to Yang Fu.

"I surrendered only to stay alive and avenge my master," Yang Fu said.

But Jiang Xu was hesitant about taking action. "Ma Chao is extremely valiant; it'd be difficult to move against him," he said.

"He is all brawn and no brains," Yang Fu countered. "It'd be easy to move against him. I have already made secret arrangements with the officers Liang (2) Kuan (1) and Zhao (4) Qu (2). If you are willing to mobilize your forces, they will help you from the inside."

The aunt now chimed in and told her son, "If you don't move now, then when? Everyone dies, but to die for honor and loyalty is a worthwhile death. Don't worry about me. If you do not listen to your cousin, then I will die first so that you would have nothing to worry about."

Given this ultimatum by dear ol' mom to man up, Jiang Xu met with his two sub-commanders, Zhao (4) Ang (2) and Yin (1) Feng (4), to discuss what to do. Zhao Ang's (2) son was presently serving under Ma Chao. After Zhao Ang (2) agreed to help Jiang Xu, he went home, told his wife what's going on, and fretted.

"Our son is currently serving under Ma Chao. If we move against Ma Chao, he would surely kill my son. What should I do?"

But his wife gave a most unexpected response. She lectured her husband sternly. "To cleanse the shame of king or father, one should have no fear of sacrificing even one's own life, much less a son! If you refuse to act for the sake of your son, then I will kill myself first!"

Given this ultimatum by his wife to man up, Zhao Ang (2) was resolved to act. The next day, the four conspirators mobilized their forces, and Zhao Ang's wife personally brought all her family's property to her husband's camp to give to the soldiers as encouragement.

Word of this little uprising soon got back to Ma Chao, and he was incensed. Just as expected, he immediately executed Zhao Ang's son. So yeah, thanks dad. He then ordered his cousin Ma Dai and his trusted general Pang De to mobilize their troops and march on the city of Licheng (4,2). Jiang Xu (4) and Yang Fu (4) led their troops out of the city to meet him. Donning white battle robes as a sign of mourning and vengeance for their dead governor, Jiang Xu and Yang Fu cursed Ma Chao, calling him dishonorable, treasonous scum. Ma Chao was ticked off and charged forward as the two sides scrummed.

Jiang Xu and Yang Fu was of course no match for Ma Chao, so they fell back in defeat. Just as Ma Chao was giving chase, however, he heard battle cries rising up behind him. Jiang Xu's (4) sub-commanders, Yin (1) Feng (4) and Zhao (4) Ang (2), were attacking his rear. Ma Chao tried to turn and face them, but now he was being blitzed from two sides.



In the thick of this battle, a huge army suddenly stormed into the fray. It was Cao Cao's general Xiahou Yuan, who had at last gotten the go-ahead from Cao Cao to come help. Better late than never, I guess. He arrived at a good time, though, as the combined might of his force and the conspirators' army overwhelmed Ma Chao and sent him scurrying.

Ma Chao fled through the night. Around daybreak, he had retreated back to his home base of Jicheng (4,2). But when he called for the city gates to be opened, he was greeted with a shower of arrows, and Liang (2) Kuan (1) and Zhao (4) Qu (2), the two officers that Ma Chao had taken into his service on Yang Fu's recommendation, were standing atop the city wall, cursing his name. What's more, they then dragged out Ma Chao's wife and beheaded her with him watching, tossing her body down from the wall. They then moved on to Ma Chao's three young sons, followed by his dozen or so relatives. Every one of them was beheaded and thrown from the wall.

As Ma Chao watched this horrifying carnage, he was so angry that he could hardly breathe and almost fell off his horse. Just then, Xiahou Yuan's army caught up to him. Ma Chao did not dare to linger and instead carved out an escape route with the help of Pang De and Ma Dai. By the time they fought their way through several rounds of enemy blockades, Ma Chao only had 50-some riders with him. They rode nonstop and arrived back at the city Licheng (4,2), the home base of conspirators, around 1 a.m.

Unfortunately for the folks inside the city, the guards at the gates thought this was their own people coming back, so they opened the gates to welcome them, only to be greeted by a super-pissed-off Ma Chao, who was out for blood after seeing his entire family slaughtered. Ma Chao stormed in through the south gate and started killing everyone, soldiers and civilians alike.

He made his way to Jiang Xu's residence, where he got a hold of Jiang Xu's 82-year-old mother. But she showed no sign of fear and instead pointed at Ma Chao and cursed him. Ma Chao pulled out

his sword and ran her through. He then moved on to the homes of Yin (1) Feng (4) and Zhao (4) Ang (2), where he slaughtered everyone in both households. The only one who managed to dodge this calamity was Zhao Ang's (2) wife, who was out with her husband's army at that time.

The next day, Xiahou Yuan's army arrived, and Ma Chao abandoned the city and fought his way westward. After a few miles, he ran into a roadblock led by Yang Fu (4). So here was the man who started this whole mess that led to Ma Chao's entire family being killed. Ma Chao rode forth seething with hatred. Yang Fu and seven of his kinsmen came out to fight Ma Chao. In no time at all, all seven of Yang Fu's kinsmen had fallen at the tip of Ma Chao's spear, and Yang Fu himself had suffered five stab wounds, but he kept on fighting.

Fortunately for Yang Fu, Xiahou Yuan's pursuing army arrived on the scene just then, forcing Ma Chao to quit the fight and move on. By the time Ma Chao managed to shake his pursuers, all he had with him were Pang De, Ma Dai, and five or six other riders.

Having chased off Ma Chao, Xiahou Yuan restored order to the region and put Jiang Xu (4) and company in charge of various key locations. He also sent the wounded Yang Fu in a carriage to the capital to see Cao Cao. Cao Cao wanted to make Yang Fu a marquis, but Yang Fu declined.

"I have neither the merit of suppressing the insurrection, nor the honor of dying with my master. By law, I should be executed. How can I accept any rewards?"

This most humble of humble brags impressed Cao Cao greatly, and he insisted on rewarding Yang Fu.

So, let's pause and examine the ambivalent morality involved in what just transpired. You could fault Ma Chao for being excessive in executing the governor who surrendered to him and his entire family, but on the other hand, he also spared Yang Fu's life for the sake of honor even though Yang Fu had advocated against surrendering. But all Ma Chao got in return for this act of honor and leniency

was a betrayal of the highest order, a betrayal that cost him not only control of territory, but also the lives of his entire family. On the other side, you could argue that Yang Fu and company might have been acting out of an honorable sense of loyalty in avenging their dead governor, but did they really have to go so far as to execute Ma Chao's whole family, including his young kids, on top of the city wall and throw their bodies off the wall? Probably not. And that act probably was what pushed Ma Chao to turn around and massacre the families of the conspirators, including an old woman. So really, in the final tally, I'm not sure anyone came off looking particularly good in this series of events.

What this series of events did do, however, was to force Ma Chao into the region of Hanzhong (4,1), where he sought refuge with Zhang Lu, the ruler of the region and former nemesis, now potential ally, of Liu Zhang. Zhang Lu was delighted to have him, as adding a valiant warrior like Ma Chao only bolstered his dreams of swallowing up Yi (4) Province while keeping Cao Cao at bay. In fact, Zhang Lu was so excited that he even thought about marrying his daughter to Ma Chao.

However, when he discussed this with his staff, one of his top generals, Yang (2) Bai (2), objected.

"Ma Chao's former wife and children met their end because of him," Yang Bai said to Zhang Lu. "How can your lordship give him your daughter?"

He had a point, and Zhang Lu decided against making Ma Chao his son-in-law. Well, word of this quickly got back to Ma Chao, who was understandably angry at Yang Bai and began to entertain thoughts of killing him. Yang Bai was no dummy, and he knew Ma Chao was not harboring good intents toward him, so he and his brother Yang Song (1) began discussing how they could do away with Ma Chao before he did away with them.

Into this tense situation rode the messenger from Liu Zhang, bearing a letter asking Zhang Lu for help. Zhang Lu initially refused, but then Liu Zhang sent one of his top advisers, Huang (2) Quan (2), to

make his case. Before going to see Zhang Lu, Huang Quan first went to see Yang Song (1) to try to get him on his side.

“The eastern and western halves of the Riverlands are like one’s lips and teeth,” Huang Quan said. “If the West falls, the East would soon follow. If you’re willing to help us, we will give you 20 districts as a reward.”

Twenty districts was no small thank-you gift, so Yang Song happily brought Huang Quan to see Zhang Lu and put in a good word for the idea of sending help. Zhang Lu was equally moved by the offer and agreed to help. But another of his advisers, Yan (2) Pu (3), objected.

“Liu Zhang’s family has been at odds with your lordship for generations,” Yan Pu said. “He’s only asking for help because he’s in dire straits. The offering of territory is a ruse. You must not help him.”

But just then, a man stepped forward and said, “I may be untalented, but I am willing to lead an army to go capture Liu Bei alive and make sure we get the promised territory,”

This was none other than Ma Chao. Zhang Lu was delighted by this, so he first sent the envoy Huang Quan back to Chengdu, and then gave Ma Chao a force of 20,000 men. As it so happened, Pang De, one of Ma Chao’s confidants who had followed him through thick and thin, was sick at the moment and could not accompany him on the campaign. So Pang De remained behind in Hanzhong while Ma Chao and his cousin Ma Dai set off. Zhang Lu appointed the general Yang Bai as the supervisor of the army. Yes, the same Yang Bai that Ma Chao could not stand and who could not stand Ma Chao. So this ought to be good.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei and his army were camped out in the city of Luocheng (4,2). The messenger that Fa Zheng had sent to see Liu Zhang came back and told them, “One of Liu Zhang’s advisers suggested to him that he should burn all the wild grains and all the grain stores at various locations,

move the people in the region to west of the Fu (2) River, and fortify his defenses instead of giving battle.”

This intel alarmed both Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, because that was the one thing that could throw a wrench in their plans. Fa Zheng, however, smiled and said, “My lord, have no worries. This plan may be effective, but Liu Zhang will not use it.”

And sure enough, within a day, word came that Liu Zhang refused to move the civilians, which put Liu Bei’s mind at ease. Zhuge Liang then advised him to march quickly on the city of Mianzhu (2,2), so Liu Bei sent the generals Huang Zhong and Wei Yan to lead his army in that direction.

To see how the battle at Mianzhu will turn out, and how Ma Chao will fare against Liu Bei and company, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.