

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 93.

Well, I hope you enjoyed our 100th episode Q&A last week. And now, let's pick up where we left off. Last time, Cao Cao was stuck in a bad situation against Liu Bei in the region of Hanzhong. If he attacked, he wasn't sure he'd win. What he really wanted to do was to quit the battlefield and go home, but he was afraid Liu Bei would laugh at him. But then his secretary Yang Xiu read his mind and decided to start packing for the trip home. When Cao Cao found out about this, he got really mad and executed Yang Xiu. He then gave the order to attack the next day.

So the next day, Cao Cao and his army marched out of the gorge they were in and were greeted by an enemy army led by Liu Bei's general Wei Yan. Cao Cao told Wei Yan to surrender, but Wei Yan replied with a string of expletives, so Cao Cao sent out the general Pang De to deal with him. Just as the two were dueling, Cao Cao's camp suddenly caught on fire, and word came that Liu Bei's general Ma Chao had launched a sneak attack on the middle and rear camps.

Cao Cao, however, refused to panic. He pulled out his sword and declared, "Anyone who takes a step back will be executed!"

Given this ultimatum, all of Cao Cao's men surged forward, holding nothing back, and Wei Yan turned and fled. Now, Cao Cao split off a portion of his troops to go fight Ma Chao, while he himself watched from a high vantage point.

But suddenly, a detachment of Liu Bei's troops appeared right in front of him, and the guy at their head was none other than Wei Yan. Wei Yan let fly an arrow, and it struck Cao Cao in the face. Cao Cao tumbled off his horse, and Wei Yan tossed aside his bow, grabbed his saber, and galloped up the hill to finish the job.

Just then, though, another warrior flashed onto the scene and shouted, "Do not harm my lord!"

This was Pang De, and he charged forward and put up a dogged fight to defend Cao Cao, eventually fighting off Wei Yan and helping Cao Cao retreat. By now, Ma Chao had called off his raid of

Cao Cao's camp, so Cao Cao was able to limp back to what remained of that camp. Fortunately for him, Wei Yan's arrow had struck him in the mouth, taking out two front teeth but leaving him otherwise unharmed, and Cao Cao was ok after getting some treatment.

After this embarrassing setback, Cao Cao finally realized that Yang Xiu, his dead secretary, was right after all. So he ordered that Yang Xiu's body be given a, you guessed it, fancy funeral, and then Cao Cao led his army toward home. He told the general Pang De to bring up the rear so as to fend off any enemy pursuit. Cao Cao himself rode in a carriage, licking his wounds while surrounded by his imperial guard.

Suddenly, word came that both sides of the canyon they were in were on fire, and that an enemy force had sprung out of hiding and was in hot pursuit. Turns out that Zhuge Liang figured Cao Cao was going to abandon Hanzhong and quit the fight, so he dispatched 10 detachments of troops to stage on-and-off surprise attacks as Cao Cao's army limped home. The morale of Cao Cao's men was in the gutter, and they couldn't get out of Hanzhong fast enough.

Once Cao Cao packed up and went home, Liu Bei turned his attention to the remaining cities of Hanzhong that were still holding out. Once they heard that Cao Cao had abandoned the region, these cities did not remain holdouts for long, and soon, Hanzhong belonged to Liu Bei, adding a significant area to his now burgeoning empire. After taking care to win over the hearts of the people in his newly conquered territory, Liu Bei rewarded his troops handsomely, and everyone was happy.

And now, Liu Bei's people all started entertaining thoughts of giving their master a promotion to, oh let's say, emperor. But of course, this was not a subject to broach lightly, so they went to talk to Zhuge Liang first. Zhuge Liang told them, "I'll take care of it," and then he and Fa Zheng, who was now kind of the second most senior adviser, went to see Liu Bei.

“Cao Cao is usurping power, and the people have no ruler,” Zhuge Liang told Liu Bei. “Your lordship’s humanity and honor are known throughout the land, and now you possess both halves of the Riverlands. You should submit to the will of heaven and of the people and formally declare yourself emperor so that you may legitimately bring the traitor to justice. You must not delay. Please pick an auspicious date.”

Liu Bei was blindsided by this suggestion.

“Director general, you’re mistaken,” he said. “Even though I am of the imperial house, I am but a vassal. If I do such a thing, it would be treason against the Han.”

“Not so,” Zhuge Liang retorted. “Right now the realm is fractured and heroes have risen up all over, with every one of them claiming their own corner of the empire. All the virtuous and talented men of the realm have risked their lives to serve their lords in the hopes of grabbing onto a dragon or latching onto a phoenix so that they could establish their merit and fame. If you cling only to a narrow sense of honor just to deflect criticism, you might disappoint everyone. I hope you will think it through.”

So what Zhuge Liang was getting at here was that, hey, all the guys who have been serving you, they need you to step up to emperor so that they can get a promotion themselves. After all, if Liu Bei just remained the imperial inspector of Yi Province or the General of the Left, then the best his people could do was an officer on his staff. But if he were to become emperor, well, then there would be all sorts of fancy new titles and ranks that could be bestowed upon his men.

“If you want me to unlawfully assume the throne, I dare not,” Liu Bei said. “We can talk about this and come up with a better plan.”

But everyone was like, nope, this is the plan. “If you lordship keeps refusing, then everyone’s devotion to you will fade,” they told him.

“Your lordship holds honor as your essence, so you might not be willing to assume the emperorship yet,” Zhuge Liang said. “But since you now possess Jing Province and the Riverlands, you could be the King of Hanzhong for the time being.”

“But even if you honor me as king, without an edict from the emperor, it would be usurpation,” Liu Bei insisted.

“It would be more appropriate to depart from the norm in this case,” Zhuge Liang pressed.

And now, Zhang Fei shouted, “Everyone else who isn’t named Liu are trying to make themselves rulers, so why not you, brother, a scion of the House of Han?! Even if you named yourself emperor, it would not be excessive, much less the King of Hanzhong!”

“Watch your mouth,” Liu Bei scolded his brother.

“My lord,” Zhuge Liang pressed again, “for the sake of expedience, you can assume the title of King of Hanzhong first, and then inform the emperor. It would still be in good time.”

Now, maybe somebody can explain exactly how this is NOT treason while Cao Cao’s elevation to kingship was, especially since Cao Cao’s promotion DID receive an edict from the emperor. But it really didn’t matter. Liu Bei tried time and again to refuse this dishonorable honor that everyone tried sooo hard to heap upon him, and in the end, he could not refuse anymore and relented. Just like how he refused being given control of Xu (2) Province time and again. And how he refused to take Jing Province time and again. And how he refused to take the Riverlands time and again. It’s amazing how no matter how much he refused to do something that would benefit him, it always seemed to get done in the end. I guess the guy just couldn’t say no to some very insistent staffers.

So, in the seventh month of the year 219, an altar was erected and decorated accordingly. All the officials took their places. Liu Bei ascended the altar, received the cap of state, the imperial seal, and the silken cord, all symbols of imperial power, and then assumed his seat and was hailed by his staff

as the King of Hanzhong. His biological son, Liu Chan (2), aka the former infant that Zhao Yun rescued from the midst of Cao Cao's army, was named the heir.

Liu Bei wasn't the only one to get a fancy new title. His officers and advisers also got promoted. Chief among them, Zhuge Liang was named director general and put in charge of the military and state affairs -- so he's basically doing the exact same thing he was doing before, but probably for twice the pay. Liu Bei also designated five Tiger Generals: Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Ma Chao, and Huang Zhong. Another general, Wei Yan, was named the governor of Hanzhong.

Once this was done, Liu Bei sent a memorial to Xuchang to let the emperor know the good news. This was a long-winded document that basically said, "Hey, I'm still your faithful servant and still trying to rid your court of traitors. All of them are dead now except for Cao Cao, but umm, yeah, he's kind of out of control now, and the imperial house really has no standing. So my advisers have pushed me -- really, I swear, they pushed me; I didn't want to do it -- but they pushed me to assume the title of the King of Hanzhong so we can restore some dignity to our house. I know I'm undeserving of this great honor, but if taking it on would help me help you restore peace to your sagely court, then I guess I'll have to submit to the wishes of all those people pushing me to do this. So yeah, I'm King of Hanzhong now, so if you could just, you know, sign on the dotted line and ratify me, then we'll be all good."

While this memorial was sent to Xuchang, word of its contents soon reached Cao Cao's ears in his palace at Yejun (4,4), and he sent along his congratulations. Oh wait, no, it's the other thing, where he goes, "You lowly mat-weaver! How dare you! I swear I will exterminate you!"

So Cao Cao was about to mobilize an extermination force to settle things with Liu Bei once and for all, but one of his advisers, Sima Yi, stepped forward and said, "Your highness must not undertake a distant campaign because of a moment's rage. I have an idea that would bring about Liu Bei's ruin in

the Riverlands without expending a single arrow. Once his strength is sapped, you will only need to send one general to lead an expedition, and success will be yours.”

“What are your thoughtful insights?” Cao Cao asked.

“Sun Quan of the Southlands married his sister to Liu Bei, but then sneaked her back to Dongwu when Liu Bei wasn’t around,” Sima Yi answered. “Liu Bei is also squatting on Jing Province. Both sides harbor great hatred for the other. You can send a well-spoken envoy to bring a letter to Sun Quan to ask him to attack Jing Province. Liu Bei would no doubt mobilize the forces of the Riverlands to save Jing Province. Then your highness can attack the Riverlands, and Liu Bei will be under siege on both fronts, and he would be in dire straits.”

Cao Cao loved that idea, so he quickly wrote a letter and sent the adviser Man (2) Chong (3) as the envoy to see Sun Quan. When Sun Quan heard that an envoy from Cao Cao had arrived, he first assembled his advisers to discuss.

“Wei (4) and Dongwu (2) didn’t use to be enemies,” the senior adviser Zhang Zhao said. “It’s all because we listened to Zhuge Liang that our two sides have been fighting nonstop all these years, bringing suffering to the people. Man (2) Chong (3) must be here to talk peace. We should receive him with courtesy.”

So Sun Quan had his advisers go welcome Man Chong, and after the appropriate courtesies, Sun Quan treated him as an honored guest. Man Chong presented Cao Cao’s letter and said, “Dongwu and Wei did not use to be enemies. It’s all because of Liu Bei that there has been hostilities between us. The King of Wei sent me here to ask you, general, to attack Jing Province, while his highness will attack the Riverlands so that we strike on two fronts. Once Liu Bei is defeated, we can divide his territory and pledge to never invade each other.”

Sun Quan read the letter and then held a feast to welcome Man Chong before sending him to the guesthouse to rest. Sun Quan then met with his advisers about Cao Cao's offer.

"Even though their plan is self-serving, it is reasonable," the adviser Gu (4) Yong (1) said. "We can send Man Chong back and tell Cao Cao we agree to a two-pronged attack. At the same time, we can send someone across the river to see what Guan Yu is up to before we take any action."

Another adviser, Zhuge Jin (3), chimed in and said, "I heard that since Guan Yu arrived in Jing Province, Liu Bei found him a wife, who bore him a son and a daughter. His daughter is still young and not yet betrothed. I am willing to go propose a marriage between her and your lordship's eldest son. If Guan Yu consents, then we can work with him to plan the destruction of Cao Cao. If he refuses, then we help Cao Cao take Jing Province."

Sun Quan liked everything he was hearing, so he sent Man Chong back to Xuchang to say that he will do as Cao Cao suggested. But at the same time, he sent Zhuge Jin to Jing Province to play matchmaker. Guan Yu welcomed Zhuge Jin in and asked him what he was doing there.

"I have come to unite our two sides," Zhuge Jin said. "My lord has a son who is very smart. He heard that you have a daughter, so he would like to propose a union between them to bind your two houses together and join forces to defeat Cao Cao. This would be a wonderful thing. Please consider the offer."

But Guan Yu did not consider the offer. Instead, he became incensed.

"How can my tiger lass be wed to a mongrel?!" he said angrily. "If not for your brother's sake, I would kill you at once! Say no more!"

And with that, Guan Yu had the guards kick Zhuge Jin out. Zhuge Jin, humiliated, scampered back to Sun Quan and told him what Guan Yu had said. Sun Quan, not surprisingly, did not take kindly to

being called a dog. I mean, he WAS the lord of his own little empire, after all. So he summoned his staff to discuss how to take Jing Province. The adviser Bu (4) Zhi (4), however, tried to preach caution.

“Cao Cao has long intended to usurp the throne from the House of Han, but he is wary of Liu Bei,” Bu (4) Zhi (4) said. “Right now, by asking Dongwu to attack Shu (2), he’s trying to use us to deflect the blow that’s meant for him.”

“But I have longed wanted to take Jing Province as well,” Sun Quan retorted.

“But right now, Cao Cao’s general Cao Ren is garrisoned in the cities of Xiangyang (1,2) and Fancheng (2,2),” Bu Zhi said. “There is no river between him and Jing Province. He could reach it by land, so why have they not made a move to take Jing Province, and instead come to ask your lordship to attack? Their intentions are blatantly obvious. Your lordship should send an envoy to see Cao Cao and ask him to order Cao Ren to mobilize his troops to attack Jing Province first. Guan Yu would no doubt move the troops in Jing Province to attack Fancheng (2,2). Once Guan Yu moves out, your lordship can send a general to launch a sneak attack on Jing Province, and success would be ours in one fell swoop.”

Sun Quan did as Bu Zhi suggested and sent a letter to Cao Cao. Cao Cao was delighted and immediately dispatched Man Chong to help Cao Ren as a consultant on how to plan their attack. At the same time, he sent a letter to the Southlands, urging Sun Quan to send his navy as reinforcement in taking Jing Province.

While Sun Quan and Cao Cao were busy scheming, Liu Bei was busy setting up his imperial regime as the newly self-crowned King of Hanzhong. He put Wei Yan in charge of the army defending the Eastern Riverlands, and then returned with his officials to Chengdu, where he engaged in some palace construction and road-building projects, as well as the stockpiling of provisions and weapons for a planned invasion of the Heartlands. But spies soon send along word of the newly forged alliance



between Cao Cao and Sun Quan and their designs on Jing Province, prompting Liu Bei to seek Zhuge Liang's counsel.

"I expected Cao Cao would try this," Zhuge Liang said. "The advisers in Dongwu will no doubt want Cao Cao to make Cao Ren mobilize his troops first."

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

"We can send an envoy to General Guan to inform him of his new office and order him to attack Fancheng first, so as to strike fear into the heart of the enemy. That will resolve the situation."

Liu Bei took this advice and sent Fei (4) Shi (1), a captain in the forward unit, to Jing Province. Guan Yu went out of the city to welcome him and they went back to the administrative compound to talk.

"What office has the King of Hanzhong bestowed upon me?" Guan Yu asked.

"The first and foremost of the Five Tiger Generals," Fei (4) Shi (1) replied.

"Who are the Five Tiger Generals?"

"You, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Ma Chao, and Huang Zhong."

Well, Guan Yu must be in a grouchy mood lately, because he found yet another reason to get angry.

"Zhang Fei is my brother. Ma Chao is from a family with a long and distinguished history. Zhao Yun has followed my brother for a long time and is basically a brother to me as well. They can all have a position equivalent to mine. But Huang Zhong? Who the hell is he, to rank alongside me? No self-respecting warrior would ever lump himself in with an old common soldier."

So Guan Yu now sat down in the dirt and threw a tantrum. Well, not quite, but he did refuse to accept the seal of office. This could've turned into a real issue, but Fei Shi laughed and gave him a history lesson,

“General, you’re in error. Remember that Xiao (1) He (2) and Cao (2) Can (1) were the closest confidants of the Supreme Ancestor as they pursued their grand enterprise together, while the general Han (2) Xin (4) was just someone who switched over from their enemy’s side. Yet, when Han Xin was given a title of king, elevating him above Xiao (1) He (2) and Cao (2) Can (1), there is no mention of those two being mad. Right now, even though his highness has appointed five Tiger Generals, he and you also share the bond of brotherhood and you two are of one body. You are him, and he is you. How can anyone else compete with that? Since you have received his highness’s great benevolence, you should share with him joy and grief, blessing and misfortune, without nitpicking over status and titles. I hope you will think this through.”

This speech brought Guan Yu to his senses, and he bowed to Fei Shi and said, “I was foolish. If not for your advice, I would have ruined everything.” And so Guan Yu bowed and accepted his new title.

This done, Fei Shi now presented Liu Bei’s decree, ordering Guan Yu to lead his forces to take Fancheng (2,2). Guan Yu accepted the order and immediately set about making preparations. The officers Fu (4) Shiren (4,2) and Mi (2) Fang (1) were appointed to lead the vanguard and they stationed their forces outside the city, while Guan Yu treated Fei Shi with a feast inside the city.

Around 9 o’clock that night, Guan Yu and Fei Shi were still drinking when suddenly, a fire broke out in the camp outside the city. Guan Yu hurriedly donned his armor and hopped on his horse to go to take a look. It turns out that while his vanguard officers Fu (4) Shiren (2) and Mi (2) Fang (1) were partying in their tent, they had neglected a fire behind the tent, and it lit some explosives. The whole camp was in an uproar, and all the weapons and provisions were destroyed in the blaze. It took Guan Yu and company until 1 o’clock that night before they could put out the fire.

Once he went back inside the city, Guan Yu summoned Fu Shiren and Mi Fang and admonished them. “I appointed you to lead the vanguard, and yet, before we even set out, you have burned so

many weapons and so much grain, and the explosives even killed some of our own men. After such a debacle, what's the point of keeping you around?!"

And so Guan Yu ordered the guards to execute the two offenders, but Fei Shi intervened and said, "It is not good for the army to execute generals before setting out on campaign. Please spare them for now."

Guan Yu relented, but he was still seething.

"If not for Captain Fei (4), I would have your heads for sure!" he told Fu Shiren and Mi Fang.

But just because they were getting off with their heads still attached, it didn't mean they were getting off completely. Guan Yu ordered that they each receive 40 strokes as punishment and removed them from their positions with the vanguard. Instead, he sent Mi Fang off to oversee the defense of the city of Nanjun (2,4), while dispatching Fu Shiren to defend the city of Gong'an (1,1). And before they set out, he told them, "When I come back in victory, if I find that you have made any mistakes, I will punish you for both offenses!" The two men were thoroughly humiliated and scurried off.

So now Guan Yu needed someone else to head up the vanguard. For this job, he turned to Liao (4) Hua (4). Now, Liao Hua was a bandit leader who encountered Guan Yu years ago while Guan Yu was leaving Cao Cao's service to reunite with Liu Bei. Then, years after that, Liao Hua went to join Liu Bei just as Liu Bei was heading into the Riverlands, so Liu Bei sent him to Jing Province to serve Guan Yu. And now, he was leading the vanguard on the coming offensive. Guan Yu also sent his adopted son Guan Ping along as second-in-command to Liao Hua. Guan Yu himself led the main army, assisted by the advisers Ma (3) Liang (2) and Yi (1) Ji (2).

That day, Guan Yu made the appropriate sacrifices to his command flag. That night, he slept in full attire in his tent. Suddenly, a black pig as big as a cow crashed into the tent and bit him on his foot.

Guan Yu angrily pulled out his sword and killed the beast, but its squealing sounded like the tearing of silk. In that moment, Guan Yu startled awake and realized it was all a dream. And yet, he felt a dull ache in his left foot, which made him feel rather uneasy, so he recounted the dream to his son Guan Ping.

“A pig resembles a dragon,” Guan Ping explained. “Having a dragon on your foot indicates you’re soaring skyward. There’s no need for concern.”

Guan Yu then assembled his staff and asked what they thought. Some said it was a good omen, and some said it was bad, which, yeah, was not very helpful. Eventually, Guan Yu put an end to the discussion.

“I am nearing 60; death no longer scares me!” he declared.

Just then, an envoy arrived with a decree from Liu Bei, appointing Guan Yu as the forward general and giving him authority over the nine districts of Jing Province. Everyone now congratulated Guan Yu and told him that this was the good fortune that his dream portended. With that, Guan Yu’s uneasiness evaporated, and he mobilized his troops and marched toward the enemy city of Xiangyang (1,2).

Xiangyang was being defended by Cao Cao’s kinsman and veteran general Cao Ren. When Cao Ren heard that Guan Yu was on his way, he was very alarmed and decided to fortify his defenses rather than go out to fight. But his lieutenant Di (2) Yuan (2) said, “The King of Wei is allying with Dongwu to take Jing Province, and now Guan Yu has come on his own accord to seek death. Why do you avoid him?”

Man Chong, the guy that Cao Cao had sent here to serve as strategist, said, “I know that Guan Yu is both brave and smart. We must not underestimate him. The best course of action is to defend.”

But the cavalry commander, Xiahou Cun (2), scoffed. “THAT is the view of a bookworm. Have you not heard that ‘floods are met with earthworks while enemies are met with an army’? Our troops are rested while the enemy is tired. That will ensure our victory.”

This last argument convinced Cao Ren, so he left Man Chong behind to defend Fancheng, while he led an army out to meet Guan Yu. To see how this fight will turn out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!