

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 101.

Happy new year everyone. This is our first episode of 2017, and as we bid goodbye to 2016 in our own time, we are about to bid goodbye to the Han Dynasty in our narrative. Last time, all the court officials were turning up the heat on the emperor to abdicate and give his throne to Cao Pi. They even went so far as to execute the guy in charge of the imperial seal when he refused to hand it over.

Seeing that the court officials were not messing around, and seeing a few hundred of Cao Pi's armed guards hanging around the main hall of his palace, the emperor wept and informed the officials, "I am willing to cede the empire to the King of Wei. I hope he will allow me to live out my years in peace."

"His highness will not mistreat you," the official Jia (2) Xu (3) told the emperor. "You should immediately issue a decree so as to put everyone at ease."

So the emperor asked Chen (2) Qun (2), one of Cao Pi's top officials, to draft the decree, which another of Cao Pi's trusted officials, Hua (2) Xin (1), then carried off to Cao Pi, followed by all the other officials. The emperor's decree said:

"My 32-year reign has seen great trouble in the land. Fortunately, the spirits of my forefathers have rescued me from peril. But now, having observed the patterns of the heavens and peered into the hearts of the people, I see that the cycle of the element of fire has expired, and a new element, corresponding to the House of Cao, now reigns. That change is attested by the martial success of the late King of Wei and the manifest and glorious virtue of the current King of Wei. The new succession thus fulfills the expectations of all.

"It is said, 'When the way of the sages prevails, the empire belongs to all.' For not favoring his own son, the ancient sage king Yao earned an immortal name. I venture to emulate him. Today, by abdicating to the prime minister and King of Wei, I follow in the footsteps recorded in the 'Canon of Yao.' I hope your highness will not decline."

So let's talk a little about this reference to the ancient sage king Yao. He is from the mythical era of Chinese history, a time marked by wise rulers with incredible lifespans. According to legend, Yao reigned for about 100 years during the third millennium B.C. Among the things he's known and admired for is how he handled the succession question. Instead of passing his title to a son, he instead chose a highly recommended man named Shun (4) and married both of his daughters to the guy, as a way to observe and evaluate him. Eventually, satisfied that Shun was up to the job, Yao abdicated his throne and passed it to Shun (4).

So in invoking the story of Yao, the Han emperor is saying, or being made to say, that he is nobly, and totally voluntarily, abdicating to a worthy man. Of course, the story of Yao is mentioned every single time a Chinese ruler has been made to step down, so it really loses a bit of its meaning after a while. But whatever. The important thing is that the emperor had issued a decree to Cao Pi, offering him the key to the empire.

After listening to the decree being read out loud, Cao Pi was delighted and ready to accept the offer. But the adviser Sima Yi stopped him.

"You must not," Sima Yi told Cao Pi. "Even though the decree has been issued, you should reply with a memorial to decline the offer so as to silence criticism."

See, there's a proper way such things are done. Yes, we know you want the brass ring, but if you pounce on it the first chance you get, you come off as, well, too eager. It's like dining out in China and your companion offers to pay. You have to decline several times before saying ok in a very reluctant manner.

So Cao Pi followed the script and had the official Wang (2) Lang (3) draft a memorial in which he said something to the effect of "I'm wholly unworthy of this tremendous responsibility. I kindly beg your highness to find someone more deserving."

When the emperor saw this reply, he was vexed and asked the court officials what he should do now. Hua Xin was all the happy to connect the dots for him.

“Back when the late King of Wei received his kingship, he refused the title three times before accepting,” Hua Xin said. “Your highness should issue another decree, and the King of Wei will accept.”

Ok. So the emperor played along with this charade and sent another decree to Cao Pi, basically saying, “Oh yes you’re so worthy of this. Please, I beg you, take my throne. I won’t have it any other way.”

With a second decree in hand, Cao Pi now asked the adviser Jia Xu, “Even though I have been offered the throne twice, I’m still worried about being branded a usurper by posterity.”

“That’s easy enough,” Jia Xu said. “Just send the envoy back and send instructions to Hua Xin. Have him ask the emperor to build an Altar for the Acceptance of Abdication. Then, pick an auspicious day and have all the officials assemble at the altar to witness the emperor personally handing over the seal. That will resolve all doubts and check all criticism.”

Of course, judging by how history remembers Cao Cao and his kin, I’d say that this strategy obviously did not work. But hey, at least it resulted in a construction project and an excuse to party. So Cao Pi sent the messenger back again with another reply saying, in effect, “I must therefore humbly beg to be relieved of this overwhelming honor.” Hua Xin then followed with the suggestion for the altar, which the emperor followed word for word. The location of Fanyang (2,2) was selected as the site for the abdication ceremony. There, they built a three-level altar and selected the pre-dawn hours of the seventh day of the 10th month as the time for the handover.

On the selected day, at the appointed hour, the emperor invited Cao Pi to ascend the altar. At the foot of the altar, all the officials were assembled, along with 300,000 imperial troops. The emperor personally presented the imperial seal to Cao Pi, and Cao Pi accepted.

All the officials now kneeled as a declaration was read aloud. I'll spare you the details, but you can guess the kinds of things that were in this declaration: Mandate of heaven, Cao Cao was great, and his son Cao Pi is just as awesome, blah blah blah.

Once the declaration was read, more ceremonies followed and then Cao Pi officially ascended to the throne of the empire. The senior official Jia Xu led his other colleagues in paying their respects to the new boss. They declared the beginning of a new era, literally. Chinese rulers gave names to different periods of their reigns, and the installation of a new emperor was definitely one of those occasions when you would declare the start of a new era. The new era was named Huang (2) Chu (3), or the Commencement of the Yellow. The yellow in this case signifies the earth, which follows fire in the Chinese order of elements. As we mentioned previously, fire was the symbol for the House of Han, so this era name signifies that the Han had been officially supplanted by the next dynasty.

The new era name was accompanied by a new name for the country -- the Wei -- adopting the name of the fief that Cao Cao had received when he was named first the Duke of Wei and later the King of Wei. Cao Pi then issued a general amnesty, which was a popular thing for new emperors to do upon taking the throne as a way to show their compassion and earn extra favor with heaven; it also didn't hurt their standings with the people. He also declared that his father, Cao Cao, was henceforth to be known as the Great Ancestor and the August Martial Emperor. So guess what, Cao Cao became an emperor after all.

All this done, it was now time to deal with the old emperor. Hua Xin now stepped forward and said to Cao Pi, "The heavens cannot have two suns, and the people cannot have two masters. Since

the Han emperor has abdicated, it is only right that he retire to a remote region. We await your instructions on where to place the Liu clan.”

With that, Hua Xin “helped” the former emperor kneel in front of the altar to await his fate. Cao Pi gave his decision, and Hua Xin now said to the deposed emperor, with a hand on his sword, “Elevating one emperor and removing another has been commonplace since antiquity. Our lord is merciful and cannot bear to do you harm, so he has named you the Duke of Shanyang (1,2). Depart for your new post immediately, and do not come to court without being summoned!”

With tears in his eyes, the deposed emperor bowed and thanked Cao Pi for his leniency and then rode off. Everyone who witnessed this end of a 400-year dynasty could not help but feel a pang of sadness.

Then, Cao Pi declared to the assembled masses, “Now I can appreciate the succession of the sage kings Yao (2) and Shun (4).”

“Long live our sovereign!” the officials chanted. So at this moment is when we finally have the first official kingdom in our Romance of the Three Kingdoms. It only took 36 years in real time, two-and-a-half years in podcast time, and 100 episodes since the start of the novel to get here.

The officials now asked Cao Pi to offer his gratitude to heaven and earth. But as soon as Cao Pi kneeled, a strange gale kicked up in front of the altar, sweeping up sand and pebbles and raining them down on the gathered masses. The debris was so thick that people could not see the person next to them. All the torches on the altar were blown out. Cao Pi collapsed on the altar in fright. The officials hurriedly brought him down from the altar, and it took a while before he came to. His attendants then helped him back to his palace, where he remained for days, unable to hold court. I guess heaven was not on board with this transition of power.

After a while, Cao Pi's condition improved somewhat, so he returned to court to receive congratulations from his officials. He named Hua Xin and Wang Lang (3) his highest ministers, and everyone else got a promotion, too. But despite returning to work, Cao Pi did not fully recover from his illness. Suspecting that this might be the doing of the numerous spirits haunting the halls of the palace in the capital Xuchang, Cao Pi decided to move to the city of Luoyang (4,2) and build a large palace there.

Word of the demise of the Han Dynasty soon reached the Shu capital of Chengdu. Liu Bei was informed that Cao Pi had usurped the throne, declared himself the emperor of Wei, and was building a palace in Luoyang. What's more, there were rumors that the former Han emperor had already been killed. This was yet another blow for Liu Bei, who had been dealing with a string of unhappy events lately. He wept bitterly day in and day out and ordered that all his officials had to go into mourning. He also offered sacrifices for the now supposedly dead Han emperor. But as a side note, this last emperor of the Han Dynasty actually wasn't dead. In fact, he would live for another 14 years. Of course, no one bothered to tell Liu Bei this, and he fell ill again from the emotional toll of all the recent tragedies, so he left all the affairs of state to Zhuge Liang.

While Liu Bei was recuperating, Zhuge Liang was busy scheming on his behalf. He met with two other senior officials, Xu (2) Jing (4) and Qiao (2) Zhou (1), about the future of the empire. Now, if you asked Cao Pi, he'd tell you the empire is doing just fine; it just has a new name and a new boss. But from where Liu Bei was sitting, the empire was in turmoil because it no longer had a true emperor, since Cao Pi is nothing more than a usurper in the eyes of someone from the House of Liu. So, the thinking goes, an empire cannot go a day without a ruler, and since the old emperor was presumably dead, we needed to find a new guy from the House of Liu to take his place. Oh hey, how convenient that we have this guy Liu Bei here, who is a member of the imperial house -- the imperial uncle, in fact

-- and he's already sitting on top of a nice little empire of his own. Let's name him emperor. But wait, is that cool with heaven and earth? How would we know? Oh if only we had a sign.

"Recently, we have had the good omen of auspicious winds and clouds," Qiao Zhou said, which on one hand was quite convenient, but on the other hand, c'mon dude, winds and clouds? When Cao Pi declared himself emperor, he had sightings of phoenixes and unicorns and dragons. Try a little harder, man.

"In the northwest corner of Chengdu, a yellow haze rose high into the sky," Qiao Zhou continued. Personally, I would just call that wind blowing dust around, but ok.

"The imperial star was seen in the middle of the western quarter of the sky," Qiao Zhou went on, and hey now we're getting somewhere. "It was shining with an august fire and bright as the moon. These signs indicate that it is time for his highness to assume the imperial throne and continue the line of the Han. There can be no doubt."

Well, nice wind and clouds and yellow dirt being blown around were good enough for Zhuge Liang and company, and the alignment of the stars didn't hurt either. So they and all the other officials submitted a petition to Liu Bei, asking him to ascend to the throne as emperor.

But when Liu Bei read this petition, he was taken aback.

"Are you trying to make me a disloyal and dishonorable man?" he said.

"Not so," Zhuge Liang replied. "Since Cao Pi has usurped the throne from the Han and made himself emperor, it is only right that your highness, as a kinsman of the Han, should continue your house."

But Liu Bei's countenance changed and he said angrily, "Am I to follow the examples of renegades and traitors?!" And with that, he waved his sleeve and walked into his private chamber, and his officials had no choice but to leave.

Three days later, Zhuge Liang once again led all the officials to court and asked Liu Bei to join them. When he arrived, they all kneeled, and the official Xu (2) Jing (4) said to Liu Bei, "The emperor of the Han has died at Cao Pi's hand. In the name of loyalty and honor, your highness must ascend to the throne and mobilize an army to punish the usurper. There is no one in the land who does not wish that your highness would become emperor and avenge your predecessor. If you do not follow your servants' suggestion, you would be disappointing the people."

"Even though I am a descendant of Emperor Jing (3), I have not done much for the people," Liu Bei said. "If I make myself emperor now, what is the difference between that and usurpation?"

Zhugge Liang and company now said, "C'mon! Do it!" But Liu Bei would not give in to their repeated entreaties.

Soon after this, Zhuge Liang began to stay home, letting it be known that he was sick. When word of this reached Liu Bei, he quickly went to check on Zhuge Liang. Sitting bedside, Liu Bei asked, "What ails you, director general?"

"An anxiety so great that I fear I do not have long to live," Zhuge Liang replied.

"What is making you so anxious?" Liu Bei asked. But Zhuge Liang refused to tell him, instead closing his eyes and just telling Liu Bei that he was too sick to discuss it.

After Liu Bei asked time and again for the cause of his ailment, Zhuge Liang sighed and said, "Ever since I met your highness and left my thatched hut, I have followed you to this day, and you have listened to my every word. Fortune has blessed your highness with both halves of the Riverlands, just as I predicted. Now, Cao Pi has usurped the throne and the line of the Han is on the brink of termination. All the officials wish to make your highness the emperor and make a name for themselves in helping you exterminate the Wei and revitalize the House of Liu. But who knew that your highness would stubbornly refuse. All the officials are now disgruntled, and they will soon



disband. Once your officials and generals are gone, if the Wei and Dongwu attack us, the Riverlands will be lost. How can I not be anxious?"

To this, Liu Bei replied, "It's not that I WANT to refuse; it's just that I fear being judged harshly by the world."

"As the sage Confucius said, 'Incorrect names make for illogical positions,' " Zhuge Liang said. "Right now, your highness would be entirely justified in taking such an action. What criticism could there be? Have you not heard of the saying, 'Refuse what heaven grants you at your own peril?' "

Relenting a bit, Liu Bei said, "We can wait until you have recovered before moving ahead."

Wait till I recover, eh? When Zhuge Liang heard that, he leaped off his bed and knocked on his screen. On cue, a bunch of court officials entered, kneeled, and said, "Since your highness has agreed, please select a date for the ceremony."

So yeah, it was all a setup by Zhuge Liang. But Liu Bei wasn't about to give in without one last protestation.

"You guys are the ones who will bring dishonor upon me," he said.

"Since your highness has agreed to our request, we should build an altar and select an auspicious date for the ceremony," Zhuge Liang said.

So honor, schmonor. We're doing this thing. Zhuge Liang asked Liu Bei to return to his palace, and then put some people in charge of planning the ceremony. They built an altar to the south of Chengdu. Once everything was ready, on the 15th of May in the year 221, the officials gathered and asked Liu Bei to ascend the altar and accept the throne. The official Qiao (2) Zhou (1) then read aloud a fancy declaration on behalf of Liu Bei, which was all about how in these awful times when usurpers threaten the empire, the land must have a ruler, and I, Liu Bei, have no choice but to humbly answer the call of heaven, and so forth.

After the declaration was read, Zhuge Liang and others brought forth a jade imperial seal, which Liu Bei received and placed on the altar. He then refused the seal time and again, just for show. Gotta look humble, you know.

“I have neither talent nor virtue,” Liu Bei said. “You should find someone who does and elevate him.”

Ok, whatever.

“Your highness has pacified the four corners of the empire, and your merit and virtue have illuminated the realm,” Zhuge Liang said, not at all exaggerating. “And since you are a member of the House of Han, it is only fitting that you should assume your rightful position. You have already made sacrifices and announced your intentions to the gods above; you cannot defer now.”

With that, the rest of the officials all shouted in unison, “Long live our sovereign!”

And so Liu Bei, who SO did not want to be emperor, was pushed by everyone around him into oh-so-reluctantly becoming emperor. He named his son, Liu Chan (2), aka the former infant that the general Zhao Yun rescued from the midst of Cao Cao’s army, as his heir. His other sons became princes. Zhuge Liang was appointed his prime minister, and everyone else got promotions as well. He also declared a general amnesty. And all the people of the Riverlands shouted huzzah upon hearing the news of Liu Bei’s ascension to emperor.

So after going 100 episodes before the founding of the first of our three kingdoms, we now have the creation of a second kingdom within the same episode. I guess that means the floodgates have opened. Anyway, the day after founding his kingdom of Shu, Liu Bei held court, and his officials bowed and lined up. Liu Bei now handed down his first decree:

“When I swore the oath of brotherhood with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei in the peach orchard, we pledged to live and die together. But my brother Guan Yu has died at the hand of Sun Quan. If I do not

avenge his death, I would be breaking my pledge. I intend to mobilize all of our forces against Dongwu to capture the traitor and avenge my brother!”

Liu Bei had barely finished relaying his intentions when someone stepped forward, kneeled on the ground, and said, “You must not.”

This was the general Zhao Yun, one of Liu Bei’s most trusted confidants and friends. So why was he opposing Liu Bei’s quest for vengeance?

“The traitor to the state is Cao Cao, not Sun Quan,” Zhao Yun said. “Right now, Cao Pi has angered the gods by usurping the Han. Your highness should make the land within the passes your target. Station your men along the upper Wei (4) River so as to bring these renegades to justice. If you do so, the Han loyalists on the other side of the passes will no doubt rush to welcome you. If, however, you ignore Wei and attack Dongwu, once our forces are engaged, they cannot be recalled quickly. Please consider this matter carefully.”

But Liu Bei was not in a mood for naysayers.

“Sun Quan killed my brother,” he said to Zhao Yun. “Also, the likes of Fu (4) Shiren (4,2), Mi (2) Fang (1), Pan (1) Zhang (1), and Ma (3) Zhong (1) all have blood on their hands. Only when I have gnawed on their flesh and exterminated their clans can my anger be soothed. Why are you trying to stop me?”

“War against traitors to the Han is a state matter, while war for the sake of a brother is a personal matter,” Zhao Yun replied. “Please put the good of the state first.”

“If I do not avenge my brother, even if I possess the entire empire, what good would it do me?” Liu Bei retorted. And so he rejected Zhao Yun’s advice and sent out the order to prepare the troops for an attack on Dongwu. He sent envoys to the neighboring Fan (1) people, an ethnic minority, to borrow 50,000 troops from them. At the same time, he sent word to Langzhong (2,1), where Zhang Fei was stationed, to give him a few nice new titles befitting the brother of an emperor.

Speaking of Zhang Fei, how has he been coping with the death of his brother Guan Yu? Uh, not well, to say the least. Ever since he got the bad news, Zhang Fei had been weeping day and night until blood from his eyes soaked his shirt. His officers tried to console him with his favorite vice -- wine. But that only exacerbated the situation because when Zhang Fei got drunk, he got angry, and he took it out on his men. Anyone who committed the slightest infraction received a whipping, and many were whipped to death. Every day, Zhang Fei looked to the South with gritted teeth and glowering eyes, seething with hatred and crying nonstop.

Then one day, an envoy arrived from Chengdu and read a decree telling Zhang Fei that he was now the brother of an emperor and holder of some fancy new titles. Zhang Fei bowed to the north to offer his thanks to his liege and then treated the envoy to wine.

"My brother Guan Yu's death must be avenged," Zhang Fei said to the envoy. "Why have the members of the court not appealed to his highness to mobilize the troops?"

"Many are advising his highness to exterminate Wei before attacking Dongwu," the envoy said.

"What kind of nonsense is that?!" Zhang Fei said angrily. "When the three of us swore our oath in the peach orchard, we pledged to live and die together. Brother Guan has fallen midway through our journey, how can I enjoy my wealth and rank alone?! I must go see his highness in person and volunteer to be the vanguard. Under the banner of mourning, I shall attack Dongwu, capture the traitors, and sacrifice them to Brother Guan so as to fulfill our oath!"

And so Zhang Fei set off for Chengdu with the envoy. To see if there will be war between Shu and Dongwu, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!