

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 105.

Before we pick up where we left off, I have a quick announcement. Around the beginning the year, I appeared on the Sinica Podcast, where I had a great time chatting with Kaiser Kuo and Jeremy Goldkorn about the Three Kingdoms Podcast and about the cultural significance of the novel. So go over to the Sinica podcast, that's spelled S-I-N-I-C-A, and check it out. And now, back to the show.

Last time, Liu Bei was riding high as he crushed Dongwu in one battle after another in his quest to avenge his slain brothers. It got so bad for Dongwu that Sun Quan offered up a really sweet peace deal. He delivered into Liu Bei's hands the two guys who assassinated Zhang Fei, and he promised to return Jing Province and Lady Sun, Liu Bei's wife and Sun Quan's sister. He also offered to be Liu Bei's ally for all of eternity if Liu Bei would just call off his war, especially seeing how most of the people directly involved in his brothers' deaths were now themselves dead.

When the envoy and Liu Bei's officials broached the topic of peace, however, Liu Bei flew into a rage.

"The one I despise most is Sun Quan. If I ally with him now, I would be turning my back on my oath with my brothers. I shall exterminate Dongwu first, and then wipe out Wei."

Liu Bei even wanted to execute Dongwu's envoy to show that he really meant business, but his officials managed to talk him out of it, and the envoy scampered back to Dongwu to tell Sun Quan that Liu Bei refused to talk peace despite his own officials' advice.

This sent Sun Quan into a panic, but the adviser Kan (3) Ze (2) told him, "You have a pillar that can prop up heaven at your disposal. Why don't you use him?"

Sun Quan asked whom Kan (3) Ze (2) was referring to, and Kan Ze said, “The important affairs of Dongwu used to all be handled by Zhou Yu. Then Lu Su took over. After Lu Su died, they fell to Lü Meng. Although Lü Meng is dead, we still have Lu (4) Xun (4) stationed in Jing Province. He has the reputation of a scholar, but in reality, he possesses talent which, in my estimation, rivals that of Zhou Yu’s. When we defeated Guan Yu, Lu Xun was the one who came up with all the ideas. If your highness make use of him, we’re guaranteed to defeat the enemy. If anything goes wrong, I am willing to share Lu Xun’s punishment.”

“If not for your reminder, all would be lost,” a grateful Sun Quan said.

But the senior adviser Zhang Zhao objected.

“Lu Xun is but a bookworm, not a worthy opponent for Liu Bei. I don’t think we should use him.”

A couple other advisers also voiced their concerns. One said Lu Xun was too young to command the respect of the officers, while another said Lu Xun may be a decent administrator but was not a general. But to all this, Kan Ze shouted, “If you do not use Lu Xun, then Dongwu is done for! I am willing to vouch for him with the lives of my entire family!”

This bold guarantee did the trick, and Sun Quan told everyone, “I have also long known that Lu Xun is a rare talent. My mind is made up; say no more.” And so he sent a messenger to summon Lu Xun.

So this Lu Xun was about 6 feet tall and had a face so handsome that it was like fine jade; in other words, the face of a scholar, not a soldier. His present rank was the General Who Quells the West, but he was about to take a big step up. He went to see Sun Quan at once upon being summoned, and Sun Quan said to him,

“Right now, the Shu army is encroaching on our territory. I am making you commander of the military to repel Liu Bei.”

But Lu Xun declined.

“The officials and officers of the Southlands are all veterans in your service,” he told Sun Quan. “I am young and ignorant; how can I command them?”

“Kan Ze has vouched for you with the lives of his entire family,” Sun Quan said. “I also have long known your talent; that is why I am making you grand commander. Please do not decline.”

“But what if the officials and officers do not respect my command?” Lu Xun asked.

Sun Quan now offered his own sword to Lu Xun.

“If anyone disobeys your orders, you may execute them first and tell me later.”

But Lu Xun still would not accept, at least not right then and there.

“Since you have entrusted me with such important responsibilities, how can I dare to not accept?” he said. “But I would like to request that your highness assemble the officials and then bestow the appointment upon your servant.”

Kan Ze also chimed in.

“In ancient times, when a commander is appointed, an altar must be built, and the white banner, the golden-axe, and the seal of command must be conferred before the commander can act with authority. Your highness should respect this tradition. Pick a day and build an altar where you officially appoint Lu Xun as grand commander, bestow upon him the axe of command, and then no one will question his authority.”

Sun Quan did as Kan Ze suggested and ordered an altar built that very night. The next day, he assembled his officials and asked Lu Xun to ascend the hastily constructed altar, where he received the rank of grand commander, Guardian of the Right, the General who Quells the West, and a marquiship. He also received Sun Quan’s sword and the seal of command that put him in charge of all

of Dongwu's armed forces. He also got this reassurance from Sun Quan: "I will take care of the homefront; in the field, you are in charge."

His authority now properly conferred, Lu Xun descended the altar, appointed the generals Xu Sheng and Ding Feng as his bodyguards, and set out immediately on land and water. But when the troops on the frontlines at the location of Xiaoting (1,2) heard who their new boss was going to be, the two generals presently in charge -- Han Dang and Zhou Tai -- were shocked.

"How could our lord put a bookworm in charge?" they said to each other. So this relationship was not off to a good start.

When Lu Xun arrived on the frontlines and assembled the officers to discuss the situation, they were noticeably disgruntled and only begrudgingly offered their congratulations on his appointment.

"His highness put me in command of the military to defeat Shu," Lu Xun said. "An army must have discipline. You all must follow regulations. There is no leniency for anyone who breaks the rules, so don't do something you will regret."

So here was this little fresh-faced kid who looks more at home with a book in his hands than a sword, telling these grizzled veterans that they needed to follow orders. Everyone just bit their tongue and gave no reply. Then, Zhou Tai said, "Right now General Sun Huan (2), our lord's nephew, is trapped inside the city of Yiling (2,2). They have neither provisions nor reinforcements. Please find a way to rescue him soon so as to put our lord's mind at ease."

But Lu Xun just said, "I know that General Sun has the loyalty of his men, so I am confident he can hold out. There is no need to go rescue him. Once I have defeated Shu, he will naturally be freed."

This was not what the men were hoping to hear, and they went off snickering under their breaths. Han Dang even said to Zhou Tai, "With this pedant in charge, Dongwu is doomed. Did you see how he conducted himself?"

“I was just testing him with my words,” Zhou Tai said. “He obviously has no idea how to defeat Shu.”

And things did not get any easier for Lu Xun going forward. The next day, he ordered his troops to fortify their defenses and to avoid engaging the enemy, but the men all mocked him for being overly cautious and ignored his order.

So the next day, Lu Xun summoned all the officers and asked, “His highness has put me in command, and I gave out orders yesterday for you to stay on the defensive. Why do you disobey my command?”

“I followed General Sun Jian (1) in his pacification of the Southlands and have been in hundreds of battles,” Han Dang answered, referring to the patriarch of the Sun family who began their conquest of the Southlands.

“All the other officers are all men who have risked life and limb for our lord or his elder brother, Sun Ce. Sir, his lordship appointed you as grand commander and ordered you to repel the Shu forces. You should be drawing up a plan and deploying troops toward that end. Yet you’re ordering us to stay on the defensive. Are you waiting for heaven to kill your enemies for you? We are not cowards. What is there to be gained by sapping our spirits like this?”

And when he said that, all the officers in the tent raised their voices as one and declared, “General Han (2) is right! We ask for a decisive battle!”

So this was borderline insubordination here, and Lu Xun responded by pulling out his sword and declaring sternly, “I may be a mere scholar, but his highness has entrusted me with this important responsibility because he saw something in me. And I will suffer any humiliation, shoulder any burden

that is required of me. You all must defend your respective locations and refrain from making rash moves. Anyone who disobeys will be executed!”

Seeing Lu Xun wield the sword and the authority granted him by Sun Quan, the officers had no choice but to pipe down, but they all went away in a huff. So Lu Xun’s command is not off to a good start.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the lines, Liu Bei had garrisoned his army at Xiaoting (1,2), and it stretched all the way back to the border of the Riverlands, spanning more than 200 miles and totaling 40 camps in all. During the day, their banners were so numerous that they blocked out the sun. At night, there were enough campfires to light up the sky. So this was an awe-inspiring sight to behold.

Spies soon brought word to Liu Bei that Dongwu had put Lu Xun in command of its forces and that his first order was for all the forces to assume a defensive posture.

“Who is this Lu Xun?” Liu Bei asked.

One of his advisers, Ma (3) Liang (2), spoke up. “Lu Xun may only be a scholar, but he is talented for his age and has very deep plans. It was his schemes that fueled their sneak attack on Jing Province.”

“So it was this boy who concocted the scheme that did in my brother?!” Liu Bei said angrily. “I shall capture him!”

And so Liu Bei ordered his army to advance, but Ma Liang preached caution.

“Lu Xun’s talent is on par with Zhou Yu’s. We must not underestimate him.”

“I am an old hand at war,” Liu Bei said. “Am I not a match for some pedant milksop?!”

So Liu Bei ignored Ma Liang’s advice and personally led his troops forward to attack various key locations along the front lines. When Han Dang saw the Shu forces on the move, he informed Lu Xun.

Worried that Han Dang might do something rash, Lu Xun hurried onto the scene to take a look for himself. He joined Han Dang atop a hill, where they watched as the Shu army swept across the field in impressive numbers. Among their ranks was a yellow canopy.

Pointing at the canopy, Han Dang said to Lu Xun, "Liu Bei must be in that army. I want to attack."

"Since Liu Bei embarked on his campaign, he has won more than 10 battles in a row and has a full head of steam," Lu Xun said. "Right now, we should just stay on easily defensible terrain and not go out. If we go out, it would not go well. We should focus on rewarding our troops and broadening our defensive strategy and wait for the situation to change. Right now, Liu Bei is parading his forces on open ground, but by maintaining a strict defensive posture, we deny them the battle they seek. They will then move to among the trees. Then I shall devise a plan for victory."

To all this, Han Dang said ok, but in his heart, he was scoffing at this weakling's cowardice. While Liu Bei sent his front column to hurl abuse at the enemy and challenge them to battle, Lu Xun just ordered his troops to ignore the insults and stay put. He personally inspected all the key locations to praise the troops while ordering them to stay on the defensive. This lack of action, meanwhile, was making Liu Bei impatient, and his adviser Ma Liang once again came to preach caution.

"Lu Xun is a man of ideas," Ma Liang said. "Your highness is undertaking a distant campaign that has spanned the spring and summer. He is refusing to give battle so as to wait for something to go wrong on our end. Please be careful."

"What ideas could he have? He's just afraid of battle," Liu Bei scoffed. "They have lost time and again, so how can they dare to come fight anymore?"

But the vanguard general Feng (2) Xi (2) pointed out a concern. "The weather is very hot, and the army is suffering from the heat because it is difficult for us to fetch water," he said.

So Liu Bei ordered each of his 40 camps to move from the open flat grounds, where water sources were sparse, to hills with lots of vegetation and more easily accessible streams. They were to stay there until summer had given way to fall, at which point they would advance again.

But Ma Liang was worried about this redeployment. "If Dongwu strikes while our forces are on the move, what then?"

To this, Liu Bei had an answer.

"I will order the general Wu Ban to lead about 10,000 weak soldiers and garrison on the flat grounds near the Dongwu camps, while I personally lead 8,000 crack troops and lie in wait inside the canyon. If Lu Xun finds out that our camps are moving, he will no doubt come attack. I will order Wu Ban to feign defeat to lure Lu Xun in, and I will strike and cut off his return path. Then he will be ours."

All the officials and officers praised this plan, declaring as one, "We cannot match your highness's brilliant ideas!"

Ma Liang, however, simply could not help but be a wet blanket.

"I heard that Prime Minister Zhuge is inspecting key locations in the Eastern Riverlands to prevent any incursions from Wei," he said. "Your highness could draw up a map of the new locations for our camps and consult with him."

"I am well-versed in military strategy as well; what need is there to ask the prime minister?" Liu Bei retorted.

So here we have probably the first instance in the novel where Liu Bei decides he was too smart to need Zhuge Liang. We'll see how that pans out. In the meantime, Ma Liang would not give up.

"As the old saying goes, 'Broad consultation makes one wise; one-sided consideration makes one blind,'" he said to Liu Bei. "Please think about it."

Tired of this incessant nagging, Liu Bei relented, but he did the thing that bosses do to shut up an employee suggesting a course of action that's probably wise but would create extra work -- he put Ma Liang in charge of his own idea.

"You may go to each camp and draw up a map of the geography and go consult with the prime minister in the Eastern Riverlands," Liu Bei said. "If something is not right, then come tell me at once."

And so Ma Liang headed off while Liu Bei continued with the relocation of his camps.

Word of this development soon reached Dongwu's side of the lines, and when Han Dang and Zhou Tai heard this, they were delighted and went to see Lu Xun at once.

"Right now, the Shu forces' 40-some camps are all relocating to more heavily wooded areas closer to water sources," they told Lu Xun. "Commander, you should seize this opportunity to attack."

Lu Xun was also delighted when he heard this, and he personally went to check it out. He saw that on a flat plain, there were barely 10,000 Shu soldiers camped out, most of whom looked old and weak. The big banner read "Wu Ban the Vanguard".

"In my view, these troops are a joke," Han Dang said. "I am willing to go with General Zhou and attack them on two sides. If we are not victorious, we shall accept punishment."

Lu Xun, however, ignored him and looked on for quite a while before pointing with his whip.

"The canyon ahead is exuding an aura of death," he said. "There must be an ambush there. They're putting these weak soldiers on the flat plain to lure us out. We must not go out."

So all the Dongwu officers now had yet more proof confirming what they suspected -- that their commander was a coward.

The next day, Wu Ban led his troops to challenge the Dongwu forces to battle. Wu Ban and his men laid it on thick, prowling around, hurling insults, and some even going so far as to removing their armor and clothes, and just lying around naked, daring Dongwu to come fight them.

All of this was too much for the Dongwu generals Xu Sheng and Ding Feng, and they went to see Lu Xun.

“The Shu soldiers have gone too far! We would like to go attack them!” they told him.

But Lu Xun smiled and said, “Sirs, you are only acting on courage and do not understand military strategy. This is their trick to lure you out. Wait three days, and you’ll see.”

“But in three days, their camps will be entrenched in their new locations,” Xu Sheng said. “How can we attack them then?”

“But I WANT them to move their camps,” Lu Xun replied, drawing another round of muffled snickers from his officers as they left.

So three days passed, and Lu Xun gathered his officers to take a look at the enemy. They saw that Wu Ban and his army of old and weak soldiers had left.

“Where that aura of death is rising is where Liu Bei will be exiting the canyon,” Lu Xun said as he pointed.

He had barely finished speaking when a stout-looking battalion of Shu soldiers appeared, protecting Liu Bei as they passed. The sight of this army scared all the Dongwu soldiers.

“THAT is why I ignored your advice to attack,” Lu Xun said to his officers. “Now that their ambush is over, within 10 days, we will defeat Shu for sure.”

Ok, so Lu Xun was right about the ambush thing, but his men were still skeptical about defeating Shu.

“If we wanted to defeat Shu, we should have made our move earlier,” they said. “Now, their camps stretch for 200-some miles, and we have stared at each other for eight months. All their key locations have been fortified. How can we defeat them?”

“Sirs, you don’t understand strategy,” Lu Xun said, and I’m sure his men appreciate being told that time and again. “Liu Bei is a hero of the times and crafty to boot. When his forces were first assembled, they maintained strict order. But now, after such a long stalemate without gaining any advantage, they are fatigued and lax, making this the perfect time to strike.”

That apparently convinced his men that their commander was not a dunce and a coward after all. Maybe they were just glad to hear any talk of fighting after staring at the enemy from behind their fortifications for so long. Lu Xun now sent word to Sun Quan, telling him that he expected to defeat the enemy in a matter of days. Sun Quan was delighted.

“Now that the Southlands have produced yet another rare talent, what need have I for worry?” he said. “All the officers wrote me to accuse him of cowardice, but I did not believe it. And now, judging from these words, he is indeed no coward!”

And so Sun Quan mobilized more troops to come provide reinforcement.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei ordered his navy to head downstream, pitching camp along the river bank as it ventured deep into Dongwu territory. The adviser Huang (2) Quan (2) expressed misgivings about this.

“The navy is sailing downstream, which means it’s easy to advance but difficult to retreat. I am willing to lead the front of the fleet while your highness stay in the back, just in case.”

“The Dongwu scoundrels are scared out of their minds,” Liu Bei said. “I am advancing in force, so what resistance can there be?”

So Liu Bei ignored repeated entreaties from his staff and divided his force in two. He ordered Huang Quan to take charge of the troops on the north side of the river, so as to safeguard against any

movement from the kingdom of Wei. Liu Bei himself led the troops on the south side, stationed them in camps along the river while looking for an opportunity to make his move.

Spies soon brought word of Liu Bei's deployment to Cao Pi in the kingdom of Wei. They told him that the Shu troops had 40-some camps stretching 200-some miles, all located near wooded hills. They also told him that the Shu official Huang Quan was commanding the troops on the north bank and sending out patrols every day and that they weren't sure what the meaning of this was.

Upon receiving this intel, Cao Pi looked up and laughed out loud. "Liu Bei is about to lose!"

His officials asked why he was so confident in his prediction, and Cao Pi answered, "Liu Bei does not understand military strategy. Who would ever build camps spanning 200-some miles to take on the enemy? And to pitch camp on such wooded, irregular ground is a big no-no. Liu Bei will surely lose to Lu Xun. The news will arrive within 10 days."

While Cao Pi's officials were still skeptical, they nevertheless asked him to deploy troops just in case.

"Once Lu Xun emerges victorious, he will no doubt mobilize the Dongwu forces to invade the Riverlands. If they go on a distant campaign, then Dongwu is left undefended. Under the guise of sending troops to help Dongwu, I will send three armies to attack them, and Dongwu will be ours for the taking."

Everyone present was impressed by Cao Pi's foresight, so Cao Pi dispatched three armies, led by his kinsman generals Cao Ren, Cao Xiu (1), and Cao Zhen (1). Now we should be familiar with Cao Ren, since he was one of Cao Cao's old war horses. But Cao Xiu and Cao Zhen are relative newcomers in our narrative. They were both distant nephews of Cao Cao's, so they're from Cao Pi's generation of the family, and they are going to start playing bigger roles in our narrative, so keep their names in mind.

Anyway, Cao Pi told his three commanders to meet on a specific date and launch a sneak attack on Dongwu, and that he would send reinforcements.

So we'll leave Lu Xun to plot Liu Bei's demise, Liu Bei blissfully unaware of said plot, and Cao Pi gleefully scheming to take advantage of the fallout. Let's go catch up with Liu Bei's adviser Ma Liang, who went back to the Riverlands to show Zhuge Liang how Liu Bei had deployed his camps. He presented the map drew up and told Zhuge Liang, "Right now we have more than 40 bases on both sides of the river, spanning 200-some miles. All the camps are close to a creek or a stream near wooded areas. His highness ordered me to bring this map to your excellency."

Zhuce Liang started to examine the map, and when he was done, he smacked the table and went "oh crap!"

"Who told our lord to deploy his camps like this? That person should be executed!" Zhuge Liang said.

"This is all his highness's own idea, no one else's," Ma Liang said.

"[Sigh] The Han Dynasty's run is indeed at an end!" Zhuge Liang sighed.

A startled Ma Liang asked Zhuge Liang to explain, and Zhuge Liang said, "It's a huge no-no to pitch camps like this. If the enemy attacks with fire, what then? Also, how can a string of camps running for more than 200 miles hold off the enemy? Calamity is near. This is exactly what Lu Xun has been waiting for. You must go see his highness at once and tell him to redeploy his camps in a different way."

"But what if Dongwu has already won? What then?" Ma Liang asked.

"Lu Xun will not dare to pursue, so Chengdu is safe," Zhuge Liang said.

"Why would Lu Xun not give chase?" Ma Liang asked.

“He is worried about Wei forces launching a sneak attack while his back is turned,” Zhuge Liang explained. “If our lord is defeated, he can find refuge at the city of Baidi (2,4). When I entered the Riverlands, I set down an ambush of 100,000 troops at nearby Fishbelly Beach.”

Ma Liang was shocked by this revelation.

“I have passed Fishbelly Beach many times, and I have never seen so much as a single soldier,” he said. “Why do you speak such falsehoods?”

“All will be revealed in time,” Zhuge Liang answered. “It’s best not to ask too many questions.”

Umm ... ok. I guess we’ll have to take your word for it. So Ma Liang got a letter from Zhuge Liang and rushed back toward Liu Bei’s camp, while Zhuge Liang immediately returned to Chengdu to prepare reinforcements.

So if you believe Lu Xun, Cao Pi, AND Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei is in for a disastrous turn of events. To see if their predictions come true, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!