

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 107.

Last time, Liu Bei was crushed by the Dongwu forces as his impressive line of camps went up in smoke, along with any hope of avenging his brothers. Sensing an opportunity, Cao Pi, the emperor of the kingdom of Wei, began entertaining thoughts of attacking one of his rivals. To figure out which one, he turned to one of his most senior officials, Jia Xu.

“My goal is to reunite the empire,” Cao Pi said. “Which should I attack first, the kingdom of Shu, or Dongwu?”

Jia Xu, however, chose C, none of the above.

“Liu Bei is a prodigious talent, and Zhuge Liang a capable administrator,” Jia Xu said. “As for Dongwu, Sun Quan has a keen eye for appraising his enemies. Lu Xun has garrisoned troops in key places. With the river and the lakes giving them protection and mobility, there is no obvious play to be made. In my opinion, none of our officers are a match for Sun Quan or Liu Bei. Even if your highness personally lead the attack, it would still not guarantee victory. Thus, our only course of action is to fortify our defenses and wait for the situation with the other two states to change.”

Cao Pi, however, was not convinced. “I have already dispatched three large armies to attack Dongwu; how can I not achieve total victory?” he asked.

But another senior official, Liu Ye (4), chimed in to agree with Jia Xu.

“Lu Xun and Dongwu just defeated a Shu army of more than 700,000. Everyone on their side is united, and they have geographical barriers in the river and the lakes. It would be difficult to overpower them. Besides, Lu Xun is full of ideas, so he will no doubt be ready.”

“But you previously advised me to invade Dongwu, and yet now you are advising against it, why?” Cao Pi asked Liu Ye.

“The situation has changed,” Liu Ye replied. “Before, Dongwu lost time and again to Shu and its momentum had been blunted, which made it vulnerable. But now they have achieved total victory and their morale has increased a hundredfold, so we cannot attack them yet.”

Still, Cao Pi had his heart set on doing something with this opportunity, so he ignored the advice.

“My mind is made up; say no more,” he told Liu Ye. And then he personally led his imperial troops to go back up the three armies he had sent out to attack Dongwu. But soon, scouts reported that Dongwu was prepared and had sent troops to counter all three of Cao Pi’s armies. Liu Ye now tried again to talk Cao Pi out of his invasion plans, seeing how they had lost the element of surprise, but Cao Pi would not back down and pushed forward anyway.

Let’s go to the frontlines and check in on one of Cao Pi’s three armies, the one led by the veteran commander Cao Ren. They were going up against the Dongwu general Zhu Huan (2). This Zhu Huan was only 27, but he had courage in spades, and Sun Quan was quite fond of him. At this time, Zhu Huan was commanding the troops at the key location of Ruxu (2,1). When he heard that Cao Ren was leading his army to attack a nearby city, Zhu Huan dispatched most of his troops to go defend that location, leaving only 5,000 cavalry to guard Ruxu (2,1).

But word suddenly came that Cao Ren had just dispatched one of his top officers, Chang (2) Diao (1), to lead 50,000 crack troops on a lightning strike against Ruxu. Zhu Huan’s men all looked intimidated when they heard that report, but Zhu Huan placed his hand on his sword and told them,

“Victory depends on leadership, not numbers. The rules of war say that defenders can prevail even with only half the attackers’ numbers. Right now, Cao Ren has come from afar, so his troops are tired. We occupy a well-fortified city, with the great river to the south and mountains to our north. We shall rest while the enemy labors and face them on our terms. Such circumstances all but

guarantee victory. Even if Cao Pi himself were to come, it would be of no concern, much less the likes of Cao Ren!”

So Zhu Huan ordered his men to lay low, making it look like no one was defending the city. As Cao Ren’s vanguard general Chang (2) Diao (1) approached Ruxu (2,1), he could see from a distance that there was no sign of any soldiers on the city walls. Thinking that he had indeed caught the Dongwu forces with their pants down, Chang (2) Diao (1) hurried his army forward.

But as they approached the city, a sudden explosive rang out, and the city walls quickly became lined with banners, as Zhu Huan galloped out with saber in hand. Chang Diao took him on, but was cut down within just three bouts. Dongwu’s troops now swept forward and crushed the Wei army, killing countless enemies and capturing numerous banners, weapons, and horses.

While this was happening, Cao Ren was approaching with the rest of his army, but now, the Dongwu troops stationed at the city that he was supposedly going to attack charged out and surprised him instead. Cao Ren was routed and he fled back to see Cao Pi and told him what had happened. Cao Pi was stunned, but just then came more bad news.

One of Cao Pi’s other two armies, led by Cao Zhen and Xiahou Shang (4), was laying siege to the city of Nanjun (2,4), but found itself under attack instead as Lu Xun led the forces from inside the city while Zhuge Jin led an army from outside, crushing the invaders.

Cao Pi had barely had time to digest this report when another arrived, telling him that his third army, led by Cao Xiu, had also been defeated. Seeing all three of his invasion forces crushed, Cao Pi sighed.

“This is what I get for not listening to Jia Xu and Liu Ye!”

Oh, and to make things worse, it was summer and a plague was sweeping through Cao Pi’s armies, killing about 70 percent of the men. All these setbacks convinced Cao Pi to turn around and head back

to his base at Luoyang (4,2). So all he got for his troubles was a bloody nose, a lot of dead soldiers, and some burnt diplomatic bridges with Dongwu.

Let's leave one emperor licking his wounds and check in on another. Liu Bei was presently holed up in the city of Baidi (2,4), too ashamed to go back to his capital Chengdu after his crushing defeat at the hands of Dongwu. The shock, disappointment, and grief he had suffered over the past year combined to make him ill, and he did not get any better. By April of the year 223, so about 10 months after his defeat, Liu Bei knew that his illness was beyond treatment. Throw in the lingering grief over the loss of his brothers, and Liu Bei's condition was worsening by the day.

One night, Liu Bei's vision became dim. Annoyed with his servants, he dismissed everyone and lay alone on his bed. Suddenly, a chilling, gloomy wind blew across the room. The flames of the candles went out and flickered back on again. In the shadows, Liu Bei could see two people standing near his bed.

"I am not in a good mood and I told you all to leave me," he said in a huff. "Why did you come back?!"

But the two figures did not back away. They simply remained standing. Liu Bei got up and saw that these were not his attendants, but rather his brothers, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

"Brothers! You're still alive?!" he said in astonishment.

"We are not men, but ghosts," ghost Guan Yu said. "The lord of heaven made us gods because he saw that we did not break our oath. Brother, the day of our reunion draws near."

Clutching his brothers, Liu Bei began to wail. Suddenly, he startled awake and saw no more sign of them. He called for his attendants, and they told him it was midnight.

"[Sigh] I am not long for this world!" Liu Bei sighed.

Knowing he did not have much time left, Liu Bei dispatched a messenger to Chengdu to ask Zhuge Liang and other key officials to come to Baidi immediately so that he may entrust them with his final instructions. When Zhuge Liang got the message, he set off right away with Liu Bei's two younger sons. The eldest son, Liu Chan (2), however, had to stay in the capital because you do NOT want the heir apparent away from your base when there's a transition of power.

Upon arriving in Baidi, Zhuge Liang saw how far gone Liu Bei was and immediately fell to his knees by Liu Bei's bedside. Liu Bei asked him to sit on the bed, whereupon Liu Bei put his hand on Zhuge Liang's back and said, "Ever since I met you, I have been fortunate enough to establish my imperial enterprise. Alas, in my ignorance, I refused to listen to you and brought defeat upon myself. My regret has turned into a disease, and my death is at hand. My heir is weak and feeble, so I must entrust you with my grand enterprise."

As he spoke, tears streamed down Liu Bei's face, and Zhuge Liang wept as well.

"Your highness must take good care of yourself, so that you may fulfill the hopes of the empire," Zhuge Liang said to Liu Bei.

As they spoke, Liu Bei scanned the room and spotted the adviser Ma (3) Su (4) standing nearby. This Ma Su (4) was a younger brother of the adviser Ma Liang (2), the guy who had tried in vain to convince Liu Bei to change his camp deployments. In fact, Ma Su was the youngest of the five brothers in his family, and he was deemed the most talented of them all. But now, Liu Bei told Ma Su to take a hike for a few minutes while he spoke to Zhuge Liang alone.

After Ma Su left, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang, "What do you think of Ma Su's talent?"

"He possesses prodigious talent," Zhuge Liang replied.

"Not so," Liu Bei said. "In my view, he is more flash than substance and cannot be entrusted with great responsibilities. You must take note of this."

So yeah, it's kind of odd that as he lay dying with important matters of state still unaddressed, Liu Bei managed to find time to kneecap a mid-level underling's career prospects, but hey, who's going to tell a dying emperor no? Anyway, after this little exchange, Liu Bei summoned the other officials into the room so that they could bear witness as he wrote his will.

Handing the will to Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei said, "[Sigh] I am no scholar, and my knowledge is crude. But as the Sage Confucius said, 'Doleful, the notes of a dying bird; precious, the words of a dying man.' I had intended for us to exterminate the Cao traitors and resurrect the House of Han together, but unfortunately, we must part ways before the task is complete. I must trouble you to give my will to my heir, Liu Chan (2), and tell him to not treat it lightly. Also, I hope you will guide him in all things."

Prostrating on the floor in tears, Zhuge Liang and company replied, "Your highness, please rest! Your servants will do all we can to repay your kindness to us!"

Liu Bei told his attendants to help Zhuge Liang up. Wiping away tears with one hand and clutching Zhuge Liang's hand with the other, Liu Bei said, "I am about to die, but I have something more I must tell you."

"What sacred instructions does your highness have?"

"Sir, your talent is 10 times that of Cao Pi's. I know you WILL be able to secure the empire and achieve our goal in the end. If my heir is worthy of your support, then support him. But if he is not, then sir, you can make yourself the lord of Chengdu."

So yeah, Liu Bei just told Zhuge Liang that hey, if my son is not the kind of man who's up to the task of reuniting the empire, then feel free to take his place. When Zhuge Liang heard this, he broke into a cold sweat and fell to his knees in a panic.

“How can I ever dare to not exhaust every ounce of his strength to serve your heir as aide and vassal and remain loyal unto death?!”

As he spoke those words, Zhuge Liang kowtowed so many times and so hard that his head began to bleed. So I think there are two ways you can look at this. One is that Liu Bei, placing the state before family, really meant what he said and just wanted to make sure he left his kingdom in the best hands possible, even if that means his son being elbowed out of the way. The second interpretation, however, is that Liu Bei, fully aware that his son would be no match for Zhuge Liang should there be conflict between them, made this gesture, knowing full well what kind of person Zhuge Liang was. And by going there and making a show of his trust in Zhuge Liang, he actually just ensured that Zhuge Liang would never turn on his son. I'll let you decide which one of these interpretations you subscribe to.

Anyway, Liu Bei now asked Zhuge Liang to sit back up on the bed and then called for his two younger sons to approach.

“You must remember my words,” he told them. “After my death, you two and your brother must treat the prime minister like a father, nothing less.”

Liu Bei then instructed the two young princes to bow to Zhuge Liang, which prompted Zhuge Liang to say, “Even if my brain and innards were scattered across the ground, I would not be able to repay the kindness that your highness has shown me!”

Liu Bei now turned his attention to the other officials present.

“I have entrusted my heir to the prime minister and instructed him to treat the prime minister as a father,” he told them. “You all must also be diligent and not let me down.”

He then said to Zhao Yun, one of the few people left who had been with him through the highs and lows, “You and I have been through thick and thin, but who knew we would part ways here. On account of our friendship, I hope you will look after my sons. Please don’t disappoint me.”

Weeping, Zhao Yun prostrated on the floor and said, “How can I dare to not do my best?!”

Turning back to the rest of the officials, Liu Bei told them, “I cannot address each of you one by one. I hope you will all care well for yourself and maintain your self-respect.”

And with those words, Liu Bei breathed his last on the 24th day of the fourth month in the year 223, at the age of 63.

Wait! You might say. Liu Bei can’t die! He’s the good guy, and the main character of the novel! And we still have almost a third of the book left! What are we going to fill those pages with?! Well, stay tuned and find out, but for now, let’s send Liu Bei off with a poem by Du (4) Fu (0), one of China’s greatest poets. This poem was written during the Tang Dynasty in the year 766, so almost 550 years after Liu Bei’s death. This Du Fu was going on a sightseeing trip around the area, which was filled with historical sites, and he was inspired to write a series of five poems ruminating on the ancients. This tribute to Liu Bei was the fourth poem in that series.

The Lord of Shu peered at Dongwu through the Three Gorges,  
Failing his quest, he breathed his last in the Palace of Eternal Peace.  
In these vacant hills one can still picture his residence,  
In the wild temple appear faint traces of its memories.  
Now are the pines near his shrine nesting places for herons,  
On solstice feast days come offerings from old peasants.  
Nearby lies the sanctum for his famous strategist,



In sacred union lord and vassal share the rites of worship.

Liu Bei's death sent all of his officials into deep mourning. Zhuge Liang and company escorted his casket back to the capital Chengdu, where the heir Liu Chan (2) came out to meet them. Liu Bei's body was put in state in the main hall of the palace, and the funeral commenced. As part of the ceremony, Liu Bei's will, addressed to his heir, was read out loud. It said:

"When I first became ill, it was no more than stomach cramps, but then complications developed and it soon became untreatable. I have heard it said that, 'After 50, one no longer dies young.' I am past 60, so death is hardly a cause for regret. But you and your brothers still occupy my thoughts. Be vigilant! Be vigilant! There is no evil deed too small to resist, and no good deed too minor to perform. Only wisdom and virtue can truly win men's devotion. My meager virtue is not worthy of your emulation. Serve the prime minister as if he were your father; do not be negligent or remiss! You and your brothers should look to him for instructions. Such is my final charge!"

After the will was read, all the officials bowed, and Zhuge Liang said, "The country cannot go one day without a lord. Let us elevate the heir so as to continue the line of the Han."

So the prince Liu Chan stepped into the throne as the new emperor of Shu. With his elevation came a couple new titles for Zhuge Liang as well. In addition to being the prime minister, he was now also the Marquis of Wuxiang (3,1) and the imperial protector of Yi (4) Province. They then buried Liu Bei and bestowed upon him the posthumous title of Liu Bei the Glorious Emperor. Liu Bei's current wife, Empress Wu (2), became the empress dowager, and his first two wives, Lady Gan (1) and Lady Mi (2), were given posthumous empress titles as well. Liu Chan then handed out promotions and rewards to all the officials and declared a general amnesty throughout his domain to get his reign off on a solid footing with men and gods alike.

As you can imagine, it didn't take long for earth-shattering news like the death of Liu Bei to spread, and it soon reached the ears of Cao Pi, who was delighted.

"Now that Liu Bei is dead, I have no worries!" he rejoiced. "I should invade Shu while they are leaderless!"

But the adviser Jia Xu tried to check his lord.

"Even though Liu Bei is dead, he must have entrusted his heir to Zhuge Liang," Jia Xu said. "Zhuge Liang feels indebted to Liu Bei for recognizing his talent, so he will no doubt do everything he can to support Liu Bei's heir. Your highness must not invade rashly."

But just then, someone stepped forth from the row of officials and said, "If we do not invade now, then when?!"

The man who had spoken was Sima Yi, a veteran adviser who had first served Cao Cao and now Cao Pi. Glad to have someone take up his side of the argument, Cao Pi asked Sima Yi if he had an invasion plan.

"If we only mobilize the forces of the North, it would be difficult to achieve a quick victory," Sima Yi said. "We must mobilize five large armies and attack on all sides so that Zhuge Liang cannot defend his front and rear. Then victory would be ours."

Ok, well that sounds good, but where do we get five armies, Cao Pi asked.

Sima Yi replied, "You can write a letter to the king of the Xianbei (1,1) nation in the region of Liaodong (2,1). Give him riches and order him to mobilize 100,000 Jians (1) troops to attack Xiping (1,2) Pass. That is the first army.

"Next, send an envoy with a letter and treasures to the Southern Man (2) tribe to see their king Meng (4) Huo (4) and order him to mobilize 100,000 troops to attack the four Southern districts of the Riverlands. That is the second army.

“Then, send an envoy to mend fences with Dongwu. Promise them territory and order Sun Quan to mobilize 100,000 troops to advance on the entrance to the Riverlands and attack the city of Fucheng (2,2). That is the third army.

“Also, order the general Meng (4) Da (2), who defected to us from Shu, to mobilize 100,000 troops from Shangyong (4,1) and strike westward at the region of Hanzhong. That is the fourth army.

“Finally, appoint the general Cao Zhen as the grand commander and have him lead 100,000 troops to attack the Riverlands through Yangping (2,2) Pass. With these five armies, totaling 500,000 soldiers, even if Zhuge Liang had the talent of the ancient strategist Jiang Ziya (3,2), he could not hope to resist us.”

Impressed and delighted by this plan, Cao Pi immediately dispatched four messengers to solicit cooperation from the four foreign powers. He also named Cao Zhen the grand commander and sent him to take Yangping (2,2) Pass at the head of 100,000 men. Now, at this time, a lot of the old warhorses from Cao Cao’s days, familiar names like Zhang Liao or Xu Huang, had been granted titles of nobility and stationed to defend key provinces, so they were not part of this invasion. This also means that I’ll likely have to throw some new names at you going forward. The times they were a-changin’.

Speaking of changes, there were many of those in the kingdom of Shu as well. Since Liu Chan ascended to the throne, a number of the officials from his father’s days had passed away from old age. The novel doesn’t mention any names, but the key takeaway is that as a consequence of all the personnel turnover, all the important issues, from the law to the economy, became the domain of Zhuge Liang, and he made all the key decisions.

One of those key decisions was finding Liu Chan a wife, since no emperor should be without an empress. On this matter, Zhuge Liang and other officials decided that the 17-year-old daughter of Zhang Fei was perfect, and Liu Chan said sure, and so it was done.

In the eighth month of the year 223, or about four months after Liu Bei's death, Liu Chan got word from the borders that umm ... our buddy Cao Pi is sending five armies our way, and they don't look too friendly. We've sent urgent reports to the prime minister, but for some reason, we haven't seen him at work for days.

Liu Chan was greatly alarmed, so he sent his attendants to summon Zhuge Liang to court. The attendant was gone for half a day before reporting back that the servants at Zhuge Liang's house said he was at home sick.

Oh boy, so five giant armies are bearing down on our borders, and the one indispensable man of the kingdom was apparently bedridden. This was not good at all. Liu Chan began to panic. The next day, he sent two of his top officials -- Dong (2) Yun (3) and Du (4) Qiong (2), to go see Zhuge Liang and brief him on the urgent situation. But they were turned away at the gate of Zhuge Liang's residence.

"The First Emperor entrusted his heir to the prime minister," Du (4) Qiong (2) said. And by First Emperor, he was referring to Liu Bei. "Our lord has just recently ascended to the throne and Cao Pi is encroaching on our borders on five fronts. The situation is urgent, why does the prime minister refuse to come out on the excuse of illness?"

After a long wait, the doorman came out with a message from Zhuge Liang, which said, "My health has improved slightly. I will be at court tomorrow morning."

Denied a meeting, the two officials had no choice but to sigh and go away. The next day, a bunch of officials again came to wait outside Zhuge Liang's residence, hoping to see him. They waited from dawn to dusk and had to leave disappointed.

Du (4) Qiong (2) now went to see Liu Chan and told him, "We request that your highness personally go to the prime minister's residence to ask him for a plan."

But first, Liu Chan and a big group of officials went to see the empress dowager to inform her of the situation. She, too, was greatly alarmed.

“Why is the prime minister behaving thus? He is betraying the First Emperor’s trust in him!” she said. “I will go see him myself.”

Now, this was no small thing. In situations where a new young emperor was on the throne, the empress dowager was often an unofficial regent and someone to whom the senior officials must show respect. But Dong (2) Yun (3) said, “Your highness should not go lightly. I suspect the prime minister must have some enlightened perspective of the situation. Let the emperor go first. If the prime minister is still negligent, then you can summon him to the ancestral temple to question him.”

And just FYI, being summoned to the ancestral temple to be questioned about why you are apparently ignoring the responsibilities that your former lord had entrusted to you was a pretty severe step, because you’re being asked to explain to the guy’s altar, and presumably his spirit, why you’ve let him down. But Liu Chan and company were hoping it would not come to that.

The next day, Liu Chan got in his carriage and went to Zhuge Liang’s house. Seeing him approach, the attendant at the door hurriedly prostrated on the ground.

“Where is the prime minister?” Liu Chan asked.

“I don’t know where he is,” the doorman replied. “He only instructed me to keep out all the officials.”

Of course, no instructions applied to the emperor, so Liu Chan went inside. As he passed through the third gate leading to the inner sanctum, he spotted Zhuge Liang. He was leaning on a stave, standing by a pond in his garden, and observing the fish. Liu Chan quietly stood behind Zhuge Liang for a while, and then spoke deliberately.

“Prime minister, are things well with you?”

So has Zhuge Liang just been feeding his koi this whole time while a crisis brewed? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!