

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 108.

Last time, Liu Bei had died, leaving his teenage heir, Liu Shan (4), in the care of Zhuge Liang. And by the way, I just realized I have been pronouncing Liu Shan's name incorrectly as Liu Chan (2). The character for his given name has two pronunciations, Chan (2) or Shan (4), and in this case, it should be Liu Shan (4), not Liu Chan (2). My apologies for the mistake.

Anyway, as soon as the ruler of Wei, Cao Pi, heard that Liu Bei was dead, he reached out to a few foreign powers and organized a five-prong invasion, ready to destroy Shu by attacking on more fronts than Zhuge Liang could handle.

Liu Shan (4) was alarmed by this, and alarm turned into panic when Zhuge Liang chose this inopportune moment to hunker down in his home and refuse to see anyone, on the excuse that he was, umm, sick. Eventually, Liu Shan (4) had to personally go to Zhuge Liang's house, where he found Zhuge Liang intently staring at his koi pond, not even noticing that his lord was standing right behind him.

After standing there for a while, Liu Shan went "ahem," and Zhuge Liang turned and saw the emperor. He immediately tossed aside the stave he had been leaning on and fell to his knees.

"Your servant deserves death 10,000 times over!" Zhuge Liang said.

Liu Shan helped Zhuge Liang to his feet and asked, "Cao Pi is invading on five fronts, and the situation on our borders is urgent. Minister father, why have you been refusing to leave your home to tend to business?"

Laughing out loud, Zhuge Liang helped Liu Shan into the house. After they sat down, Zhuge Liang said, "How can I not have heard the news already? I wasn't fish-watching; I was deep in thought."

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

"I have already repelled the armies of the Qiang (1) tribes, the Southern Man (2) king Meng Huo, the renegade general Meng Da, and the Wei general Cao Zhen," Zhuge Liang informed his liege. "The

only one left is Sun Quan, and I already have an idea for how to deal with that army, but I need a well-spoken man to serve as envoy and I haven't found that person yet. That was what I was contemplating. What need has your highness for concern?"

One could argue that keeping your lord and master in the dark while you engage in matters of supreme national security would be one cause for concern, but Liu Shan was so relieved to hear that the problem had been almost completely taken care of that he just said, "Minister father, your strategies are truly unfathomable! I would love to hear how you managed to repel the invasion."

"The First Emperor entrusted your highness to me, so how can your servant dare to be negligent in his duties?" Zhuge Liang replied. "None of the officials in the capital understand the intricacies of the art of war. Secrecy was the key, so I could not let anyone know."

"When I heard that the Qiang tribes were invading Xiping (1,2) Pass, I thought of the general Ma Chao. He and his family have lived in the Riverlands for generations and have been on good terms with the Qiang people, who regard him as a heavenly general with supernatural powers. So I sent a messenger to see Ma Chao with all due haste to tell him to maintain a tight defense at Xiping (1,2) Pass and to deploy four hidden battalions, to be rotated daily. That will take care of that invasion force."

"As for Meng (4) Huo (4) and the Southern Man (2) forces that are encroaching on four of our districts, I dispatched the general Wei (4) Yan (2) to lead an army and stay on the move as a decoy. The Man (2) forces rely only on their valor but are paranoid. When they see the decoy, they would not dare to advance. So we don't have to worry about them."

"As for Meng (4) Da (2) attacking the region of Hanzhong, I knew that he and our official Li (3) Yan (2) are sworn brothers. So when I was returning to the capital, I left Li Yan to defend the city of Baidi (2,4). I have already written a letter in Li Yan's handwriting and had it delivered to Meng Da. Meng Da

will no doubt pretend to be sick and not advance, thus weakening his troops' morale. So that army is of no concern either.

"I also heard that Cao Zhen (1) was going to attack Yangping (2,2) Pass. That location is on treacherous terrain and easy to defend. I have dispatched Zhao Yun to lead an army and defend the pass but not give battle. When Cao Zhen sees that we won't go out to fight, he will retreat before long.

"So none of those four invasion forces are of any concern, but just to be safe, I have also secretly ordered the generals Guan Xing (4) and Zhang Bao to each lead 30,000 troops and garrison at key locations so as to reinforce on any of those fronts as needed. None of these deployments came through the capital, so no one knew anything about it.

"That leaves only the Southlands' army, but they probably won't make a move. If they saw that the other four invasion forces were victorious and that the Riverlands were in peril, then they would no doubt join the attack. But if those other four armies did not fare well, why would Dongwu make a move? I suspect that Sun Quan is holding a grudge against Cao Pi for the three armies he sent to invade Dongwu, so Sun Quan would not do as Cao Pi asks. But even so, I need to send a well-spoken person to Dongwu to explain the situation to them. If we dissuade Dongwu first, then the other four armies are of no concern. But I haven't found the right person to send to Dongwu, which is why I have been in a quandary. But there was no need for your highness to visit me personally."

Most of what Zhuge Liang just explained probably whooshed over Liu Shan's head, since he was 1) a teenager and 2) not the sharpest tool in the shed, according to the descriptions of him that have been passed down through the ages. But he was delighted to hear that Zhuge Liang basically had the problem handled.

“Even the empress dowager was thinking about coming to see you,” he told Zhuge Liang, “but having heard your explanation just now, it’s as if I just woke up from a dream. I have no more cause for concern!”

Having put his young lord’s mind at ease, Zhuge Liang now shared a few cups of wine with him before seeing him out. Waiting them outside was a gaggle of officials who had been standing there all this time. They saw delight on the young emperor’s face as he got back in his carriage and returned to the palace, but they received no explanation from anyone and were all confused. All that is, except one man, who began to look skyward and laugh in delight.

This caught Zhuge Liang’s attention. He recognized this man as Deng (4) Zhi (1), the secretary of the Agricultural Tax Department. Zhuge Liang discreetly told his men to ask Deng Zhi to stay while the other officials left. He then invited Deng Zhi to his library and asked him, “Right now, the empire is divided into the kingdoms of Shu, Wei, and Wu. In order to reunite the empire, which of the other two kingdoms should we attack first?”

Deng Zhi replied, “In my humble opinion, even though Wei is the traitor to the Han, it is too powerful to destabilize quickly. We must take it slow. Our lord has just ascended to the throne and our people are still unsettled. Right now, we should ally with Dongwu and wash away the bad blood incurred by the First Emperor. This is playing the long game. What does your excellency think?”

This answer drew a smile from Zhuge Liang. “I have long thought so as well, but had not found the person for the task. But now, I have!”

“What task are you referring to?” Deng Zhi asked.

“I want to send someone to strike up an alliance with Dongwu,” Zhuge Liang said. “Sir, since you understand the intent of this action, you would most certainly not let us down. None but you can be the envoy.”

“But with my limited talent, I fear I would not be up to the task,” Deng Zhi said.

“I will inform the emperor tomorrow that I will ask you to take on this assignment; please do not refuse,” Zhuge Liang insisted.

The requisite feigning of humility performed, Deng Zhi relented and took his leave. The next day, Zhuge Liang told Liu Shan that he had found his envoy, and Deng Zhi set out for Dongwu.

So at this time in Dongwu, the commander Lu Xun was riding high. Not only did he defeat Liu Bei, but he then turned away the three armies that Cao Pi sent on an attempted sneak attack. Sun Quan now heaped upon Lu Xun the titles of the General who Upholds the Kingdom, the marquis of Jiangling (1,2), and the imperial protector of Jing Province, and Lu Xun assumed command of all of Dongwu’s forces.

Around this time, a messenger from Cao Pi arrived to see Sun Quan and told him, yeah, so about that time when we apparently sent three armies to attack you. See, what happened was that Shu had asked for us for help after you guys had licked them, and the situation was very confusing and we weren’t quite sure what was going on, so we sent some troops to answer their call. In any case, it was all just a big misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that we now regret very much. In fact, we regret it so much that we plan to send four armies to go conquer the Riverlands. Hey, we’ll cut you in if you want. Send your own troops to help us, and when it’s all said and done, we’ll share any newly won territory with you, 50-50.

Sun Quan could not make up his mind whether to accept this offer, so he asked the advisers Zhang Zhao and Gu (4) Yong (1). Zhang Zhao told him, “Lu Xun has great insights; you should ask him.” So yeah, way to earn your paycheck there, buddy.

In any case, Sun Quan summoned Lu Xun, who told him, “Cao Pi sits securely in the Heartlands and cannot be taken down quickly. If we do not oblige his request now, he would no doubt hold a

grudge. In my estimation, no one in Wei or Dongwu is a match for Zhuge Liang, so let's just agree to Cao Pi's request for now and begin preparing our troops while we wait for word on the other four invasion forces. If they are victorious and the Riverlands are in trouble and Zhuge Liang cannot protect all the fronts, then you can dispatch your troops to attack and take Chengdu. That would be the best course of action. But if the other four armies lose, then we'll reconsider."

So Sun Quan told Cao Pi's envoy that he needed some time to get his army together, but once he's ready, he'd set out at once. The envoy took his leave and went back and report to Cao Pi that Sun Quan was on board.

But Sun Quan first sent out spies to see how the other invasion forces were doing. When word came back that the answer was "not well at all," Sun Quan told his court officials, "It's as though Lu Xun could see the future. If I had acted rashly, I would have made an enemy of Shu yet again."

Just then, attendants reported that Deng Zhi, an envoy from Shu, was there to see him.

"This must be Zhuge Liang's scheme. He sent Deng Zhi here to dissuade us from attacking," Zhang Zhao said.

"So how should I respond?" Sun Quan asked.

"We can set up a giant cauldron in front of the hall, fill it with oil, and heat it up until the oil is boiling," Zhang Zhao said. "Then pick 1,000 stout-looking soldiers, each equipped with a sharp blade, and have them line up from the palace gate all the way to the hall. Then summon Deng Zhi. Before he can even say a word, tell him you are going to boil him alive like the king of Qi (2) did to Li (4) Shiqi (2,2). See what he has to say then."

So this historical reference that Zhang Zhao just made was from the days before the founding of the Han (4) Dynasty. The unfortunate sod he mentioned -- Li (4) Shiqi (2,2) -- was an adviser to Liu Bang (1), the future Supreme Ancestor and founder of the Han Dynasty. At the time, there were

several factions vying for power, and Li (4) Shiqi (2,2) went to convince the ruler of the kingdom of Qi (2) to join Liu Bang. He was very persuasive, and the king agreed, so the king ordered his defenses to stand down. But when that happened, Liu Bang's chief rival, Xiang (4) Yu (3), became jealous of Liu Bang's new gains, so while the Qi (2) forces had their guard down, Xiang (4) Yu (3) swooped in and conquered a great swath of that kingdom's territory. The king of Qi thought that Li (4) Shiqi (2,2) was in league with Xiang Yu and had set him up, so he had the guy cooked alive. Thus always to all who would dare to wag their tongue in a foreign court. So Sun Quan was going to threaten to stage a reenactment of this extremely painful death to test Deng Zhi's mettle.

With the oil bubbling in the cauldron and the armed guards all standing ready, Sun Quan summoned Deng Zhi. Now, I can only imagine how long it took to set all this up. I mean, it's not like you would just keep a giant cauldron and a few hundred gallons of cooking oil on hand just in case your lord decided that day that he was going to boil an envoy. ... Well, actually, considering how dangerous inter-state diplomacy was in this novel, maybe you do keep those things handy. But even if you do, how long would it take to boil a giant cauldron of oil?

In any case, the oil was boiling and Deng Zhi was summoned. He tidied up his outfit and entered the palace. When he approached the gates, he saw two rows of ferocious-looking guards, wielding knives, axes, halberds, and swords, lining up all the way to the main hall. Deng Zhi knew immediately what was in store, but he showed no sign of fear and pressed forth undaunted.

When he arrived at the main hall, he saw the giant cauldron with the bubbling oil, while the guards around him glared at him. But Deng Zhi merely let out a faint smile. When the attendant brought him into the hall to see Sun Quan, Deng Zhi merely bowed low from the waist but did not prostrate on the ground as an envoy might be expected to when paying his respects to the head of a rival kingdom.

Sun Quan did not take kindly to this slight. There was a curtain separating him and Deng Zhi, but he now had the curtain rolled up and shouted, “Why are you not on your knees?!”

Deng Zhi answered with an air of confidence, “A great kingdom’s envoy does not prostrate himself before the ruler of a lesser kingdom.”

Uh, this doesn’t seem like the best thing to say if you don’t want to end up deep fried. Sun Quan, understandably irate, told Deng Zhi, “You think too highly of yourself. You think you can emulate Li (4) Shiqi (2,2)? You may help yourself into the cauldron at once!”

But Deng Zhi simply laughed out loud and said, “Everyone says Dongwu has lots of talent, but who knew that you would be afraid of a mere pedant?”

What? What? Sun Quan was now as hot as the oil in the urn. “Why would I be afraid of you?!”

“If you do not fear the messenger, then why fear his message?” Deng Zhi retorted.

“You have come on Zhuge Liang’s behalf to convince me to refuse Wei and ally with Shu, correct?”

“I am but a pedant from Shu,” Deng Zhi said. “I have come for Dongwu’s own good. Yet you have set up a boiling cauldron and stationed guards to keep an envoy away. How petty are you?”

So this strategy of continuing to insult the guy threatening to toss you into a cauldron of boiling oil was a risky play, but luckily for Deng Zhi, it worked. Sun Quan indeed felt a little embarrassed, so he waved off his armed guards, summoned Deng Zhi to come closer, and offered him a seat.

“Sir, what do you want to tell me about Wu and Wei?” Sun Quan asked.

“Which does your lordship wish for, peace with Shu or peace with Wei?” Deng Zhi asked him.

“I want to discuss peace with the Lord of Shu,” Sun Quan replied, “but I am worried that he is young and inexperienced and might not be able to see any agreement through to the end.”

“Your highness is a splendid champion recognized by all,” Deng Zhi said, “and Zhuge Liang is also a standout in his own right. Shu has the protection of the mountains, and Wu has the barrier of the



three rivers. If our two states can become allies, then we would be able to either devour the empire together or enjoy the advantages of a three-way balance of power. On the other hand, if your highness submit to Wei, then Wei would no doubt expect you to go to their court and demand that you send your son to serve as their emperor's attendant. If you refuse, then they would attack you, and Shu would also sail down the river and attack. If that happens, then the Southlands would no longer belong to your highness. If you think my humble opinions are wrong, then I will die in front of your lordship, so that you would not think me a glib troublemaker."

When he was done speaking, Deng Zhi pulled up his robes, left his seat, and stomped toward the bubbling cauldron, making ready to leap into the boiling oil. Sun Quan hurriedly ordered his men to stop him and then invited him into the private quarters, where Sun Quan treated him as an honored guest. Now THIS was more like it.

"Sir, your words match my thoughts exactly," Sun Quan said. "I would like to form an alliance with the Lord of Shu. Are you willing to make the introduction for me?"

But Deng Zhi wasn't about to let Sun Quan off the hook that easily.

"A moment ago, your highness wanted to cook me; and now, you want to recruit me. With such indecision, how can you gain anyone's trust?"

"My mind is made up. Please have no doubts," Sun Quan reassured Deng Zhi.

Having convinced Deng Zhi of his intentions, Sun Quan now assembled his officials and said to them, "Even though I control the 81 districts of the Southlands, plus Jing Province, we still cannot compare to a remote place like Shu. They have Deng Zhi, who has done his master justice. How is it that there is no one in Wu who can go to Shu and convey my intentions?"

At that, one man stepped forth and volunteered to be Sun Quan's envoy. This man was named Zhang (1) Wen (1), an Imperial Corps Commander.

“I am concerned that when you see Zhuge Liang, you would not be able to effectively convey my true sentiments,” Sun Quan said.

“Zhuge Liang is but a man; why would I fear him?” Zhang Wen replied.

That answer was apparently exactly what Sun Quan was looking for, because he was delighted and rewarded Zhang Wen handsomely and sent him to the Riverlands with Deng Zhi.

Back in the Riverlands, after Deng Zhi left for Dongwu, Zhuge Liang began laying the groundwork for the next step in the diplomatic process. He went to see his lord Liu Shan (4) and told him, “Deng Zhi will definitely succeed on his mission. Dongwu has many talented men, so they will no doubt send someone to return to courtesy. Your highness should receive them with all due respect so that we may conclude the alliance when they return to Dongwu. Once we are allies with Wu, Wei will not dare to invade our territory. With things quiet on those two fronts, I will march south to pacify the southern barbarians and then invade Wei. Once Wei is vanquished, then Dongwu will not be able to persist for long either. Thus will we re-establish the unity of the empire.”

To all this, Liu Shan just basically said sure, do as you see fit. Soon, Deng Zhi returned with the Dongwu envoy Zhang Wen (1). Liu Shan assembled his staff in the throne room to receive them. Now, Zhang Wen was letting this important assignment go to his head, as he strode in confidently and paid his respects to Liu Shan, who then granted him a seat and threw a feast. At this banquet, Liu Shan was merely a ceremonial figure and did none of the talking. After the banquet, the Shu officials escorted Zhang Wen to his guesthouse.

Then next day, it was Zhuge Liang’s turn to throw a party in Zhang Wen’s honor. At this feast, Zhuge Liang said to Zhang Wen, “When our First Emperor was alive, relations with Wu were poor. But now he has passed on, and our current lord greatly admires the King of Wu and wishes to bury old

grudges and form an everlasting alliance to join forces against Wei. I hope you will relay this to your master in fair words.”

Zhang Wen agreed, and they continued to drink. As the wine flowed, their spirits eased, and Zhang Wen’s smile became wider and wider, and his ego became bigger and bigger.

The next day, Liu Shan bestowed gifts of gold and silk upon Zhang Wen and ordered the court officials to hold a banquet south of the city to bid him goodbye. At this banquet, at Zhuge Liang’s behest, the wine flowed freely. So Shu was definitely pulling out the stops to make sure this alliance thing would happen.

In the middle of the drinking, a man stumbled in half inebriated, made a haughty gesture of salutation, and took his seat among the attendees. Puzzled by this party-crasher, Zhang Wen asked Zhuge Liang who he was.

“His name is Qin (2) Mi (4),” Zhuge Liang answered. “He is the official scholar.”

So this Qin Mi character appeared in our narrative a little while back. He was among the officials who spoke up against Liu Bei’s idea of invading Dongwu. He was so vocal in his objections that Liu Bei wanted to execute him, but was talked out of it and merely threw Qin Mi in jail. But I guess with hindsight being 20-20 and with Liu Bei now dead, Qin Mi got a reprieve. And now, he’s crashing state diplomatic functions.

When Zhang Wen heard Qin Mi’s title, he laughed and said, “He may be called a scholar, but is there actual scholarship in him?”

Oh, so it’s gonna be like that, huh? When Qin Mi heard that, he said severely, “Even the little kids in Shu tend to their studies, much less me!”

“Then may you tell us, sir, what you study?” Zhang Wen retorted.

“Astronomy and geography and everything in between,” Qin Mi answered. “The three teachings and the nine sects -- the philosophers of every school. I have mastered them all. I have also read through the histories chronicling the rise and fall of many dynasties, as well as the classics transmitted by the sages.”

When Zhang Wen heard this reply, he again laughed.

“Sir, since you have made such a boast, then may I ask you about the sky? Does the sky have a head?”

“Of course.”

“Where is this head?”

“In the West. To quote the Book of Odes, ‘The High Ancestor looked to the West for a new king,’ so the head must be in the West.”

And just a brief aside here: The Book of Odes, or as it’s called in Chinese, the Shi (1) Jing (1), is a collection of more than 300 poems from the Zhou Dynasty. These works date from the the 11th to 7th century BC, so some of them were written well more than a millennium before the time of the Three Kingdoms. It is one of the five classics, which form part of the canon of Confucianism. So any Confucian scholar worth their salt would need to be well-acquainted with this book.

So if you have seen the movie Good Will Hunting, then you would probably remember [a scene](#) where Matt Damon, playing the angry genius, and Scott Winters, portraying a snobbish grad student, are in a Harvard bar, debating the evolution of the market economy in the southern colonies in a pedantic competition to see who has the bigger ... umm ... bibliography. What’s happening between Zhang Wen and Qin Mi is basically the third-century Chinese equivalent of that scene. So do we have a problem here? Are Zhang Wen and Qin Mi gonna have to step outside? Well, let’s see.

“Does the sky have ears?” Zhang Wen asked.

“Heaven is located high above, but it hears those far below,” Qin Mi replied. “As the Book of Odes says, ‘The crane cries in the remote swamps, but its voice reaches Heavens above.’ So how could Heaven hear without ears?”

“Does the sky have feet?” was Zhang Wen’s next question.

“It does. The Book of Odes says, ‘Heaven advances step by step.’ How can that be possible without feet?”

“Does the sky have a surname?”

“But of course!”

“What is the sky’s surname?”

“It is Liu.”

“How do you know that?”

“The emperor, the son of heaven, is named Liu. That is how I know.”

“And is the sun born in the east?”

“Yes, but it ‘dies’ in the west.”

So Qin Mi easily blew through Zhang Wen’s entire line of pedantic questions, not even hesitating for a moment in any of his replies, a feat that stunned all those in attendance and left Zhang Wen speechless. And now, it was Qin Mi’s turn.

“Sir, you are a well-known scholar from Dongwu,” he said to Zhang Wen, not being facetious at all. “Since you asked me about the sky, you must be well-versed on the matter. In ancient times, after the division of the primal substance, yin and yang were formed. The lighter, finer essence rose skyward to become heaven. The grosser, darker essence congealed as earth. After Gong (4) Gong (1) lost the war, he headbutted Buzhou (4,1) Mountain and ...” oh you know what, forget this. Qin Mi just keeps going on and on like this, and all this stuff is related to China’s creation myth and earliest

legends, which would take way too long to get into. Here's what you need to know: Qin Mi ended this little spiel by asking a really pedantic question, and Zhang Wen was totally stumped and basically backed away like that PhD student in Good Will Hunting, muttering, "Nah man, there's no problem. It's cool," while everyone else looked on uncomfortably like those girls in the Harvard bar. Oh, and none of this actually mattered in the slightest bit in the grand scheme of the novel, so let's move on.

And hey, look: All this pedantic back-and-forth actually put us well over our usual episode length, so let's pick this up next time. To see how Zhang Wen liked them apples, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!