

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 109.

Before I go on, I just want to do one of those occasional spots where I say thank you to everyone for listening to the show and supporting the show. I've noticed an uptick in downloads recently, and that's all thanks to everyone who has helped spread the word and everyone who heard the word and decided to check out the podcast for themselves. Also, we are closing in on 100 ratings on iTunes, so if you haven't done so yet, take a minute and give the show a rating there. It really does help increase the show's visibility and make it easier for others to discover it. And thanks again for all that you guys do!

So last time, we left off with the kingdoms of Shu and Wu ready to hug it out and call themselves allies again, putting aside old animosities for the sake of mutual survival. Wu sent an envoy named Zhang Wen (1) to Shu to formalize the alliance, and while he was being wined and dined, Zhang Wen was getting a little too full of himself. That is, until he decided to pick a fight with one of the Shu officials, a man named Qin (2) Mi (4), over some pointless pedantry. Qin Mi showed that he was the uber-nerd, and Zhang Wen, having swallowed a huge slice of humble pie, left his seat, bowed to the alpha nerd, and said, "I had no idea there were so many talented men in Shu! Your arguments have been positively illuminating!"

Zhuge Liang now intervened to spare Zhang Wen further embarrassment.

"The riddles posed during the banquet were in jest," he said to the envoy. "You, sir, are well-versed in matters of defense and administration of a state, much superior than such rhetorical jousts."

Zhang Wen thanked Zhuge Liang for this face-saving gesture. Zhuge Liang then ordered his own official Deng (4) Zhi (1), who had initiated the diplomatic talks, to accompany Zhang Wen back to the Southlands to repay their courtesy of sending an envoy. The two men set off right away.

When they arrived in Wu, they found that Sun Quan and his officials were just talking about them. The two men went in to see Sun Quan. Zhang Wen prostrated before his lord and sang the praises of Zhuge Liang and Liu Shan (4), the lord of Shu, and reported that they were eager to form an everlasting alliance and that they had sent Deng Zhi back to return the courtesy. Conveniently, he forgot to mention the part where he got his butt handed to him by Qin Mi in their rhetorical joust. In any case, Sun Quan was delighted and held a feast to welcome Deng Zhi.

During the banquet, Sun Quan asked Deng Zhi, “Won’t it be great if our two kingdoms can work together to exterminate Wei so that the realm would know peace under their two separate rulers?”

Now, the diplomatic thing to say here would probably be just some noncommittal utterance like “uh huh.” But Deng Zhi was not one to play that.

“The heavens cannot have two suns, and the people cannot have two kings,” he replied. “If we do exterminate Wei, who knows with whom the mandate of heaven would lie? But the rulers must cultivate their virtue, and the vassals must exhaust their loyalty. That will put an end to the wars.”

Rather than being put off by this answer, Sun Quan was impressed by Deng Zhi’s honesty. “There is no doubting your sincerity!” he said as he laughed. He then bestowed a lot of swag upon Deng Zhi and sent him back to Shu. From that day forth, the kingdoms of Wu and Shu were on good terms again.

So when you have three kingdoms and two of them are on good terms with each other, that usually means the third kingdom is not cool with it at all. And thus was the case here. When word of this new alliance reached the North, Cao Pi, the ruler of Wei, was incensed.

“Now that Wu and Shu have become allies, they must be harboring thoughts of invading the Heartland! I should stage a pre-emptive strike!”

So Cao Pi gathered his court to discuss an invasion of Wu. At this time, two of his most senior people -- the general Cao Ren and the official Jia Xu -- had died, so others have stepped into their shoes. One of those advisers, Xin (1) Pi (2), urged patience.

"The Heartland has vast territory but few people," Xin (1) Pi (2) said. "It may not be advantageous to wage a war right now. The best course of action is to cultivate the army and the fields for 10 years. When both our provisions and troops are plentiful, we can put them to good use, and THEN Wu and Shu will be defeated."

"That is the argument of a bookworm!" Cao Pi said angrily. "Right now Wu and Shu have become allies, and they will encroach on our borders sooner or later. How can I wait 10 years?!"

So Cao Pi ordered his army to attack Wu immediately. The adviser Sima Yi now offered up this suggestion:

"Wu has the geographical barrier of the Great River, which cannot be crossed without ships. Your highness must personally take command of the army. Dispatch a fleet of warships of all sizes. Enter the Huai (2) region from Cai (4) and Ying (1). Take the city of Shochun (4,1). When you reach the city of Guangling (3,2), cross the river and capture Nanxu (2,2). That is the best approach."

Cao Pi did as Sima Yi suggested and immediately began the construction of his fleet. He built 10 imperial ships, each large enough to hold more than 2,000 people. He also rounded up some 3,000 warships. In the eighth month of the year 224, he assembled his officers. He appointed Cao Zhen (1) to lead the vanguard, accompanied by the veteran generals Zhang Liao, Zhang He, Wen (2) Pin (4), and Xu Huang. The generals Xu Chu and Lü (3) Qian (2) stayed in the middle of the army as Cao Pi's bodyguards, while the general Cao Xiu (1) brought up the rear. The officials Liu (2) Ye (4) and Jiang (3) Ji (4) tagged along as strategists. This army of more than 300,000 set out on both land and water. Meanwhile, Sima Yi was left to mind the shop back in the capital Xuchang.

Spies soon reported this to Wu, and Sun Quan was greatly alarmed and immediately assembled his court to discuss how to repel the invasion. The adviser Gu (4) Yong (1) said, "Since we have formed an alliance with Shu, your highness should write to Zhuge Liang and ask him to mobilize his troops from Hanzhong so as to divide Wei's forces. Then, send a general to garrison troops at Nanxu (2,2) to repel the enemy."

"No one except Lu Xun is up to this task," Sun Quan said.

"But Lu Xun is overseeing the defense of Jing Province and must not be moved lightly," Gu (4) Yong (1) countered.

"[Sigh] I'm aware of that, but there's no one else who can do the job," Sun Quan lamented.

But before he had finished speaking, one man had already stepped forth and said, "Even though I am untalented, I am willing to lead an army to resist the Wei forces. If Cao Pi dares to personally cross the river, then I will capture him alive and present him to you. Even if he does not cross the river, I will still kill most of his troops so that they would not dare to set their sights on Dongwu again!"

The man who spoken was the general Xu (2) Sheng (4), who up to this point in the novel had been more or less a background character and supporting actor in Dongwu's military hierarchy, but now he was leaning in and angling for greater responsibilities.

"If you can defend the south shore of the river, I would have no worries!" a delighted Sun Quan said. So he made Xu Sheng the General Who Pacifies the East and commander of the forces at the cities of Jianye (4,4) and Nanxu (2,2). Xu Sheng then set off at once to take his post.

When he arrived at his new command, Xu Sheng ordered the troops to prepare weapons and banners to stage a defense of the river bank. But one of his officers said, "General, his highness has entrusted you with this great responsibility with the intent to defeat the Wei forces and capture Cao

Pi. Why are you not sending troops across the river to meet the enemy in the Huai (2) region? If you wait until Cao Pi's army gets here, it would be too late.

The man who had spoken was Sun Shao (2), a nephew of Sun Quan's. He held the post of the General Who Exhibits Power and once served in the defense of the key city of Guangling (3,2). So remember the other nephew of Sun Quan's that we met a few episodes earlier, the one who insisted on going to fight Liu Bei but then got his butt kicked and had to wait for Lu Xun to save him? Well, this Sun Shao (2) was his cousin, and they were pretty much built from the same mold -- young, headstrong, filled with sheer courage and an overabundance of self-esteem.

"Cao Pi has a huge army, plus he has famous generals leading his vanguard, so we cannot fight them on the other side of the river," Xu Sheng said to Sun Shao (2). "When their ships have massed on the north shore, then I will have a way to defeat them."

But as you may guess, that was a less-than-satisfactory answer for Sun Shao, who countered, "I have 3,000 men under my command, and I am well-acquainted with the roads and geography around Guangling (3,2). I am willing to cross over to the north side of the river by myself and fight it out against Cao Pi. If I lose, you may punish me according me to military law."

Xu Sheng refused, but Sun Shao insisted. Xu Sheng refused some more, and Sun Shao insisted some more. This went on for a little while before Xu Sheng lost his patience with this upstart.

"How can I make the other officers follow my orders when you refuse to obey?!" Xu Sheng said angrily as he ordered the guards to take Sun Shao outside for execution. So the executioners dragged Sun Shao outside the gates to the camp and raised a black flag, the signal that an execution was imminent. Sun Shao's lieutenant quickly reported this development to Sun Quan, and Sun Quan rushed over to save his nephew.

As he approached the camp, Sun Quan could see the executioner getting ready to bring the knife down on his nephew's neck. Sun Quan rushed onto the scene and shushed the executioners away.

Seeing that his uncle was getting his back, Sun Shao now acted like a spoiled brat as he cried and said to Sun Quan, "I used to be stationed at Guangling and know the area well. If we do not fight Cao Pi there and instead wait until he is on the river, Dongwu is doomed!"

As Sun Quan entered the camp, Xu Sheng greeted him and said, "Your highness appointed me as commander of the forces against Wei. General Sun Shao disobeyed military law and deserves to be executed. Why did your highness intervene?"

"Sun Shao is headstrong and accidentally violated regulations," Sun Quan replied. "I hope you can forgive him."

"But the law was not established by your servant, nor by your highness," Xu Sheng retorted. "It was set by precedent in our kingdom. If we spare him because of his relation to you, what authority can we command from others?"

"He did break the rules and should be left to you to be punished as you see fit," Sun Quan admitted. "But his family name was originally Shu (4), and my brother adored him and granted him the honor of the Sun family name. He also has served me well. If you execute him today, it would damage the bond between me and my brother."

So, with his boss pulling the "You make a great point, but" argument, Xu Sheng had no choice but to relent. Sun Quan now ordered Sun Shao to thank Xu Sheng, but that spoiled little brat refused to bow and instead said loudly, "In my opinion, the right move is still to go attack Cao Pi! I would sooner die than to agree with you!"

Xu Sheng's face changed colors at this insolence, and Sun Quan quickly shushed Sun Shao and told him to get lost before Xu Sheng changed his mind. Sun Quan then consoled Xu Sheng and said, "Even if we lost that kid, it would not be a loss to the army. Just don't use him from now on."

So really, what just transpired here is kind of the antithesis of what one would expect from this situation. I mean, this is where you would expect Sun Quan to make the noble sacrifice and put state before family and tell Xu Sheng to go ahead and lop off his nephew's head because the army's discipline demanded it. Instead, Sun Quan played the role of the muddle-headed lord, coddling his relative at the expense of his commander and his army. I personally would have expected better from Sun Quan, who is depicted as a generally wise ruler in the novel. I guess everybody has their soft spot, and Sun Quan's was bratty, impulsive nephews. Anyway, having sort of resolved the issue, Sun Quan now left the camp.

Except, of course, the issue wasn't really resolved. That very night, Xu Sheng got word that Sun Shao had taken the 3,000 men under his command and slipped across the river. Sigh. Now on top of having been insulted by this brat and having his authority undermined, Xu Sheng had to play babysitter and go save his butt, because it won't look good with Sun Quan if anything happened to his precious nephew. So Xu Sheng dispatched the general Ding Feng with 3,000 troops and a secret plan, sending him across the river to back up Sun Shao.

Now, as for Cao Pi, he was cruising down the river on his imperial ship. When he arrived at the city of Guangling (3,2), his vanguard commander Cao Zhen was waiting for him with an army on the bank of the river.

"How many soldiers does the enemy have on their shore?" Cao Pi asked Cao Zhen.

"We didn't see a single one from this side, nor did we see any banners or camps," Cao Zhen replied.

"This must be a trick. I will go check it out myself," Cao Pi said. So he ordered his ship to continue farther down river and pull up close to shore. Sitting aboard his fancy ship, Cao Pi peered toward the

south bank, but just as Cao Zhen described, he saw not a soul. Cao Pi now turned and asked his top advisers, Liu Ye (4) and Jiang (3) Ji (4) whether they thought it would be a good idea to cross the river.

“The art of war is all about deception,” Liu Ye said. “They see us coming, so how can they not be prepared? Your highness must not act rashly. Let’s wait a few days and see if there’s any movement. Then we can send the vanguard across the river to scout things out.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Cao Pi said, and so they stayed put.

That night, Cao Pi’s army camped along the river. It was a moonless night, so the soldiers lit torches, and they had so many torches that night turned to day. On the opposite side of the river, however, there was not so much as a flicker. Cao Pi was puzzled. After all, a hidden army could stay out of sight during the day, but on a dark night like this, even a hidden army would need some kind of light to help them see, right? Cao Pi asked his staff why there was no light on the south shore, and his men said, “They must have fled when they heard that your highness was coming.” It was a total bootlicking answer, of course, but Cao Pi liked having his boots licked, and he secretly smiled at the thought of his own might.

As day broke, a heavy fog settled on the surface of the river, obscuring the opposite bank. Suddenly, a strong wind kicked up and scattered the fog, and now, Cao Pi and company could see on the opposite bank a string of towers and forts, lined with banners and weapons that glimmered under the sun. Momentarily, one scout after another arrived, telling Cao Pi, “The opposite bank of the river is lined with forts, boats, and chariots, running for more than a hundred miles. They all popped up overnight!”

Cao Pi was stunned by this development, but little did he know that THIS was the real deception. The opposite bank was indeed lined with towers, but they were all fake, and so were the soldiers defending them. Xu Sheng had used a bunch of strawmen, dressed them in black, stuck banners in



their hands, and put them atop the fake towers and forts. But from the other side of the river, this straw army looked real enough, and it sent chills down the spines of the Wei soldiers. Even Cao Pi was reduced to lamenting, “[Sigh] Wei may have hordes of warriors, but they are of no use. The Southlands have such talent in their midst; it looks like the time is not right for an attack.”

Just then, a violent gale swept across the river, sending the waves roaring skyward, and one of these waves splashed Cao Pi and soaked his clothes. But a wet shirt was the least of his worries. The wind was so strong that Cao Pi’s ship was about to capsize. Seeing this, the commander Cao Zhen immediately dispatched the general Wen (2) Pin (4) on a small boat to go retrieve Cao Pi. By the time Wen Pin got close to the imperial ship, it was swaying back and forth so hard that those on board could no longer stand upright. Wen Pin leaped onto the ship, carried Cao Pi on his back, jumped back into the boat, and rowed to a safe harbor.

Cao Pi had barely caught his breath before he was hit with another shocking development. An urgent dispatch arrived, informing him that the Shu general Zhao Yun had marched an army out of Yangping (2,2) Pass and was heading straight for the key city of Changan (2,1). The color drained from Cao Pi’s face when he heard this, and he immediately ordered his army to fall back. This was no organized retreat, however, as all the troops just ran in disarray. As they ran, behind them came the Dongwu troops in pursuit. Cao Pi was pressed so hard that he had to abandon all the fancy imperial swag he had brought along.

Just as the imperial ship was about to enter the River Huai (2), the sound of drums and horns suddenly blared out, along with earth-shattering cries of war. An army slashed into the ranks of the Wei soldiers, led by none other than Sun Quan’s petulant nephew Sun Shao (2). The Wei forces could not withstand this assault, and the majority perished, with countless men drowning in the river. So Sun Shao kind of lucked into an easy win here after running off against his commander’s orders.

Cao Pi was fortunate to escape with his life, as his generals put up a dogged fight to protect him. They crossed over the River Huai (2), but had not gone 10 miles when suddenly, the reeds in the river, which had all been soaked with fish oil, were set ablaze. As the wind howled, the flames roared and swept across the water, stopping the imperial ship. A panicked Cao Pi hopped onto a small boat and fled. By the time his boat reached land, the imperial ship was already engulfed in flames.

Cao Pi now abandoned the waterways and fled on horseback. But no sooner had he mounted his horse did a battalion of enemy soldiers appear, led by the Dongwu general Ding Feng, the guy that Xu Sheng had dispatched to back up Sun Shao. Cao Pi's veteran general Zhang Liao quickly rode forth to take on Ding Feng, but Ding Feng struck him in the waist with an arrow. Fortunately, another veteran Wei general, Xu Huang, rescued Zhang Liao, and they all fled with Cao Pi, leaving countless men behind for the slaughter.

So this battle turned out to be a complete rout for Dongwu. Sun Shao and Ding Feng captured numerous horses, chariots, boats, and weapons. While the Wei forces limped home in defeat, Xu Sheng returned to Dongwu victorious and was handsomely rewarded by Sun Quan.

On Cao Pi's side, there was more bad news. The wounded general Zhang Liao made it back to the capital Xuchang, but then his wound got worse, and he soon died, which was a pity. For his years of outstanding service to the house of Cao, Zhang Liao received a fancy funeral.

Meanwhile, the Shu general Zhao Yun was marching toward Changan when a messenger arrived with a sudden change of plans. Zhuge Liang sent word that a veteran commander of Yi (4) Province, a man named Yong (1) Kai (3), had gone rogue and struck up an alliance with Meng (4) Huo (4), the king of the barbarian Man (2) nation that resided to the south of Shu. Yong (1) Kai (3) and 100,000 barbarian troops were presently running amok in four southern districts of Yi (4) Province, and Zhuge Liang needed to go do something about them, personally. So he was sending the general Ma Chao to

defend Yangping Pass, and Zhao Yun was being recalled so he could accompany Zhuge Liang on his southern expedition. Zhao Yun immediately turned around and headed to the Shu capital of Chengdu, where Zhuge Liang was preparing the army for the campaign.

So let's do a quick reset here. It was now the year 225, a couple years after Liu Bei's death and his son Liu Shan's (4) ascension to the throne. Zhuge Liang, in the role of prime minister, was overseeing all matters big and small. He was not the type to delegate, as every decision had to go through him. But the guy was a genius and quite a capable administrator, from everything we are told. The people of the Riverlands prospered, and there was relative peace in their kingdom. It was said that the kingdom was doing so well that the people did not bother to close their doors at night because no one had any reason to break into somebody else's house, and when they came across something that somebody had dropped on the street, no one bothered to pick it up because they all lacked for nothing. They also benefitted from several years of good harvests, so old and young alike tapped their contented bellies as they rejoiced in song. Any time there was work that needed to be done, everyone snapped to. So basically, it was paradise on earth living under Zhuge Liang's wise and benevolent administration. As a result, the army was amply supplied, and the granaries and treasury were overflowing. I'll go out on a limb here and say that some of this might be JUST slightly hyperbolic, but it does seem like the kingdom was doing pretty well under Zhuge Liang's stewardship.

But in the year 225, the aforementioned barbarian raids crashed into this perfect little paradise. The barbarian king Meng (4) Huo (4) convinced Yong (1) Kai (3), the governor of Jianning (4,2) district, to turn against his masters and ally with the barbarians. Two other governors in the area, Zhu (1) Bao (1) and Gao (1) Ding (4), also joined the barbarians.

So before we go on, let's pause the narrative and talk a little bit about these southern barbarians, the Man (2). The way we've been referring to them is a bit misleading, because it may give you the

impression that this was one unified group of people with a common culture and political system. In fact, the term in Chinese, Nan (2) Man (2), literally just translates to “Southern Barbarians”, and is a pejorative term that refers to indigenous people who reside in southwest China. These people belong to different ethnic minorities and different cultures, and they did not have a single political entity that ruled over them all.

We see the term “Nan Man” first mentioned in the Book of Rites, which is believed to have been written in the Warring States Period and referred to things that happened in the Zhou Dynasty, so we’re talking about at least six or seven centuries, maybe even a millennium, before the Three Kingdoms period. What we know about these indigenous people from the ancient historical texts paints the kind of stereotypical image you would expect when a large empire that sees itself as the center of the world is describing the small tribes living on its periphery. There’s no shortage of gawking at long hair, tattoos, animal skins, and the like. But we actually know little about the Nan Man’s society, how the different tribes in the region were connected, and how they dealt with each other.

In the novel, the Nan Man is kind of portrayed as some confederation of barbarian tribes all answering nominally to sort of a king of kings named Meng Huo. In reality, Meng Huo is believed to have been a leader who represented the gentries in one region of the territory occupied by the people collectively dubbed the Nan Man, so probably a lot less influential than he is portrayed to be in the novel.

And by the way, let’s just point out that calling an ethnic minority living on your borders “barbarians” is a very ethnocentric point of view, portraying these people’s culture as inferior to that of the glorious Han empire. It goes without saying that the Nan Man people were far from uncivilized, but they’re painted as such in the novel, so I figured I should not sugarcoat this particular prejudice in the retelling.

So anyway, out of the four districts in the south of Yi Province, only one remained loyal to Shu. In the district of Yongchang (3,1), the governor Wang (2) Kang (4) refused to turn, so the other three governors -- Yong (1) Kai (3), Zhu (1) Bao (1), and Gao (1) Ding (4) -- laid siege on the holdout city. Wang (2) Kang (4) and his deputy, a man named Lü (2) Kai (3), rallied their people in a dogged defense, but their situation was critical.

Word of this trouble soon reached Zhuge Liang in the capital. To see how he will deal with this uprising and bring the light of Han civilization to the natives, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.