

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 116.

Last time, after seven tries, Zhuge Liang had finally convinced the Nan Man king Meng Huo to submit. With his mission accomplished, Zhuge Liang headed home, but his army ran into a roadblock at the River Lu (2), where apparently all the spirits of those killed in battle were stirring up trouble and making the river uncrossable.

Zhugge Liang asked the locals what could be done about this problem, and they told him, “Just do what we did in the old days: Kill 49 people and offer their heads as a sacrifice, and the spirits will dissipate.”

Uh, has anyone thought about the irony of killing people to appease the angry spirits of people who were killed? Anyone? Anyone? No? Well, how about we try not killing anybody this time.

Instead of following the gruesome tradition, Zhuge Liang turned not to his executioners, but to his chefs. He asked the army cooks to slaughter some oxen and horses and roll out some dough. They then made a bunch of buns stuffed with beef, lamb, horse meat, and the like. These buns were made to look like human heads, which is just freaky. And Zhuge Liang dubbed them Man Tou. Now that word has stuck through the ages and is now used to refer to Chinese steamed buns, though the present-day incarnation of what’s called Man Tou typically has no filling inside; it’s just all dough. Today, the Chinese buns that have fillings are called a different name, and they don’t look like human heads. Thank goodness for that.

But, there’s something more going on here, and it once again goes back to the Chinese’s love of homonyms. The character for Man in Man Tou sounds like the character Man in Nan Man, the name given to the Southern barbarians that Zhuge Liang just conquered. In fact, that character Man in Nan Man literally means barbarian. The character Tou means head. So Man Tou, the name of the food that Zhuge Liang just invented, literally sounds like “Barbarian Head.” And that is how Zhuge Liang supposedly invented one of the great staple foods of Chinese cuisine.

Having made 49 delicious buns shaped like human heads, Zhuge Liang and company went to the bank of the river, put the buns up on a table, and set up 49 lanterns. He then raised streamers high to summon the lost souls and placed the buns on the ground. Around midnight, Zhuge Liang donned a gilded headdress and a cloak of crane feathers and personally officiated the sacrifices. He then ordered a super long sacrificial text read aloud. This thing is so long that I'm not going to read the whole thing here. I'll include a link on the website to the English version of this text, and you can read it for yourself. But in summary:

"The savage barbarians started this bloody mess, so I had to come down South and finish it, and boy did I ever finish it. But while I was kicking butt, some of my men were clumsy enough to get themselves killed. But no worries, guys. I'll talk to the emperor and make sure your families are taken care of. And as for you savage barbarians who got killed, we'll make regular sacrifices to you. But remember, in life you felt the chilling awe of the divine majesty, and in death, you're still subject to the imperial aura. So yeah, death does not grant you get-out-of-jail-free card from imperial subjugation. So behave yourself and don't make trouble. Here are some buns. Woe, woe. Heed my grieving voice."

Now, I was perhaps paraphrasing a little liberally just now, but Zhuge Liang really did say the "you're still subject to our rule in death" thing. In any case, apparently nobody found anything objectionable in what he said. After he finished speaking, he started wailing, and all the men in his army, as well as Meng Huo and all his men, were so touched that they also wept. Overhead, thousands of shades appeared amid the dark clouds and fog and then dissipated with the wind. Zhuge Liang then ordered his men to cast the sacrificial items into the river. So after all that, nobody got to taste this delicious new culinary invention.

The next day, Zhuge Liang and his army returned to the south bank of the river, and now, they found that the clouds and fog had disappeared, and the air was still and the waves calm. The Shu army crossed the river without any problems, and they had a smooth journey back to the district of Yongchang (3,1), where their Southern expedition began. Zhuge Liang left a couple guys in charge of the four districts in the area and sent Meng Huo and his men back home, with a reminder to be conscientious in administration, give guidance to his subordinates, and be gentle with the people and make sure they do not neglect their farms. Meng Huo and company took their leave with, what else, tears in their eyes.

Zhuce Liang then led his army back to the Shu capital of Chengdu. The young emperor Liu Shan (4) traveled 10 miles outside the city to wait for him, which was a huge honor. When he saw his young liege, Zhuge Liang hurriedly dismounted from his carriage and prostrated on the road.

“It is my offense that I could not quickly pacify the South, causing your majesty to worry,” said Zhuge Liang, not humble-bragging at all.

Liu Shan helped Zhuge Liang to his feet, and they returned to the city side by side, threw a big party, and rewarded the troops. After that, envoys from more than 200 minor kingdoms came to pay tribute and homage to the court. Now THIS was more like it. Isn't imperial subjugation much better for everyone? Zhuge Liang also made good on his promise to make sure all the slain soldiers' families were taken care of. So everybody in the kingdom was as happy as can be.

Alright, I think we've spent enough time on the kingdom of Shu for now, so we'll leave Zhuge Liang and company to enjoy their recently secured paradise on earth and go check in on the kingdom of Wei. We're now in the year 226, and Wei was still ruled by Cao Pi, the son of Cao Cao, who was now in his seventh year as emperor after doing what his old man refused to do by casting aside the old Han Dynasty. And we're gonna get into some of his family business here.

So way way back in the podcast, back when Cao Cao was in the process of finishing off the sons of Yuan Shao, his main rival in the North, we had an episode where after Cao Cao sacked Yuan Shao's stronghold of Yejun (4,4), Cao Pi stumbled across the wife of one of Yuan Shao's sons. She was hot, and he said, "Ok, you're with me now." So this woman, Lady Zhen (1), became his wife and later his empress. She bore him a son, who was named Cao Rui (4). This kid was very smart even at a young age, and Cao Pi adored him. But this domestic bliss was not to last.

The trouble started when Cao Pi took a liking to another woman, whose last name was Guo (1). He made her a concubine. But that was not enough for Lady Guo (1). She wanted to be empress, which meant getting rid of the current empress. To do that, she conspired with a vassal. When Cao Pi fell ill one time, they told him the reason he was sick was that Empress Zhen (1) was putting a curse on him. As evidence of this alleged witchcraft, they produced a wooden figure with Cao Pi's date and time of birth on it, which they claimed to have unearthed in the empress's palace. Cao Pi was furious and immediately ordered the empress to commit suicide, and she dutifully obeyed. After that, Lady Guo got her wish and became empress, but she produced no child. So she adopted Cao Rui (4) as her own, which I can only imagine was all sorts of awkward. And after all this, Cao Pi refrained from making Cao Rui his heir, despite his affection for the kid.

So all this happened a few years before our current place in the novel. By the time Cao Rui turned 15, which would have been around the year 221, he was already skilled in archery and riding. In February of the year 226, Cao Pi took Cao Rui on an imperial hunt. This is the kind of hunt where the emperor's men would go into the woods and flush out some helpless prey, and the emperor would try to shoot it with an arrow. On this occasion, they flushed out a doe and her fawn. Cao Pi took aim at the mother and dropped her with one shot. He then turned and saw the baby deer kneeling in front of Cao Rui's horse.

"My son, what are you waiting for? Shoot it!" Cao Pi shouted.

But Cao Rui wept and said to dad, “Your highness has already killed the mother, how can I bear to kill the child, too?”

Oomph. Now that’s some heavy-handed metaphor, and it was not lost on Cao Pi. He tossed his bow to the ground and said, “My son, you’re such a benevolent and virtuous prince!” So he named Cao Rui the Prince of Pingyuan (2,2). The title was nice, but more importantly, Cao Rui now had the inside track to the throne.

Just three months after this touching scene, Cao Pi came down with severe chills, and no medicine seemed to help, and soon it got really serious. Recognizing that the end was drawing near, Cao Pi summoned three of his most senior officials, who all carried titles that were some form of supreme commander, to his bedside. They were Cao Zhen (1), Chen Qun (2), and Sima Yi (4). Cao Zhen was a distant cousin of Cao Pi’s, and he had been the top commander of the Wei army since the old war horses from Cao Cao’s days died off. Chen Qun is somebody we hadn’t really mentioned in the podcast, but apparently he has been hanging around Cao Cao and Cao Pi’s court for a while, because according to history, he and his father were originally serving under Lü Bu and then joined Cao Cao after Lü Bu was vanquished. And as for Sima Yi, he had been a court official since Cao Cao’s days and obviously rose to the big leagues during Cao Pi’s reign.

With the three men gathered before him, Cao Pi summoned his son Cao Rui, pointed at him, and told his officials, “My illness is severe and beyond treatment. This son of mine is young. You three must serve him well; do not disappoint me.”

“My lord,” the three officials replied, “please do not say such things. Your servants will do all we can to serve you, from now to the end of days.”

“The city gates of Xuchang cracked without cause this year,” Cao Pi said. “That is an ominous sign. I know my death is at hand.”

While they were speaking, another supreme commander arrived -- and just how many supreme commanders can you have? This was another of Cao Pi's cousins, Cao Xiu (1), and he was there to see how his lord was doing. Cao Pi summoned him in and told him and the others, "You all are the pillars of the kingdom. If you can work as one to serve my son, then I will die in peace."

Having spoken those words, tears rolled down Cao Pi's cheek, and he soon expired. He was just 40 years old at the time and had been on the throne for seven years.

With Cao Pi dead, his officials went into mourning and elevated his son Cao Rui to the throne. This was followed by the customary round of handing out posthumous titles to the just-deceased former emperor, as well as Cao Rui's late mother. A bunch of people at court got promotions, and a general amnesty was declared.

There was one other piece of logistics that needed attention. Two provinces within Wei's borders, Yong (1) and Liang (2), were missing a superintendent. Sima Yi volunteered for the job, and Cao Rui granted his request, putting him in charge of the armies of those two provinces. So Sima Yi headed off to his new post.

Spies soon carried word of all these new developments into the kingdom of Shu. When Zhuge Liang heard the news, he was alarmed.

"Cao Pi is dead and the boy Cao Rui is on the throne," he said. "No one else is of any concern, but Sima Yi is a man of deep strategy, and he has taken control of the armies of Yong (1) and Liang (2) Provinces. If he whips them into shape, they will be a huge concern for us. We should stage a preemptive strike."

But the adviser Ma (3) Su (4) spoke up against a military campaign.

“Your excellency has just returned from pacifying the South. Our troops are tired. We should tend to their welfare rather than launching another distant campaign. I have an idea that would make Sima Yi die at Cao Rui’s hand. I just don’t know how you feel about it.”

Zhuge Liang asked about this idea, and Ma Su continued:

“Even though Sima Yi is a high official, Cao Rui has always been suspicious of him. Why don’t we send some people to key cities in Wei like Luoyang and Yejun (4,4) to spread rumors, saying that Sima Yi is planning a coup. We can also make a fake proclamation under Sima Yi’s name and post it everywhere to rouse Cao Rui’s suspicions. That will surely drive him to kill Sima Yi.”

Zhuge Liang liked that idea, so he dispatched some men to put it in motion.

Soon thereafter, a proclamation was found posted to the main gate at the city of Yejun. The guards peeled it off and brought it to Cao Rui. This proclamation said:

“I, Sima Yi, Chief Commander of the Flying Cavalry and superintendent of the armies of Yong (1) and Liang (2) Provinces, do hereby reverently and in good faith proclaim to the empire: The August Emperor Wu (3), founder of this house -- and he’s referring to Cao Cao here -- originally wanted his third son Cao Zhi (2) to be his heir. But treachery and calumny have conspired to make Cao Zhi a submerged dragon for years. The imperial grandson, Cao Rui, with no record of virtue, unconscionably placed himself on the throne, in violation of our August Emperor’s last wishes. Now, acting in accordance with the will of heaven and of the people, I will soon raise an army to fulfill all the people’s wish. When this proclamation reaches you, let every man pledge his allegiance to his new lord. Whoever resists will have his entire clan exterminated! Let this advance notice be made known far and wide.”

When Cao Rui read this, he was alarmed and the color drained from his face. Remember that his uncle Cao Zhi was indeed a favorite of Cao Cao’s, but lost out to Cao Pi in a succession struggle and was basically shipped off into exile. But he was still alive, and if Sima Yi, with some hefty troops at his

command, had decided to use him as a rallying point for a coup, the kingdom was in for some serious turmoil.

So Cao Rui quickly consulted his court. Hua (2) Xin (1), the grand commandant, told him, “This must be why Sima Yi volunteered to go oversee Yong (1) and Liang (2) Provinces. The August Emperor Wu used to often tell me, ‘Sima Yi has the hungry eyes of an eagle or a wolf. He must not be entrusted with command of troops, and he will eventually be trouble for the kingdom.’ Now that his rebellion has come to light, we must put it down quickly.”

Another senior official, Wang (2) Lang (3), chimed in in agreement: “Sima Yi is well-versed in military strategy and has long harbored great ambitions. If we don’t eliminate him now, he will be trouble.”

So on that advice, Cao Rui was just about to hand down a decree saying that he was going to personally lead an expedition to put down Sima Yi. But just then, supreme commander Cao Zhen stepped forward and said, “We must not. Emperor Wen (2) -- and he’s referring to Cao Pi here -- entrusted your lordship to us because he knew Sima Yi did not harbor any rebellious intent. Right now we don’t know the truth. If we send an army now, it would drive him to rebel. This could be spies from Shu and Wu trying to make us turn on each other so that they would have an opportunity to attack. We don’t know for sure yet. Please think it through.”

“But what if Sima Yi really is rebelling?” Cao Rui asked.

“If your lordship have doubts, you can do what the Supreme Ancestor did when he pretended to go on a sightseeing tour. When Sima Yi hears your majesty is heading his way, he would no doubt come to welcome you. You can then observe his actions and arrest him right then and there.”

Ok, timeout. Cao Zhen just made a reference to when the Supreme Ancestor pretended to go on a sightseeing tour. What’s he talking about? So the Supreme Ancestor, as we all should know by now, was the founder of the Han Dynasty. But after the dynasty was founded, he had problems. Chief among



them was one of his top commanders, Han (2) Xin (4), a guy whose military tactics had helped him win the empire, but whose actions were now causing him heartburn. This Han Xin had at one point more or less ransomed the Supreme Ancestor into bestowing a kingship on him, so the Supreme Ancestor was always wary of a potential coup by Han Xin. So at the suggestion of one of his advisers, the Supreme Ancestor pretended to be going on a tour inspect his realm. When he was approaching Han Xin's territory, customs required Han Xin to come welcome him, which Han Xin did without any suspicions. Well, the joke was on him, as the Supreme Ancestor had him arrested right then and there. Han Xin was accused of treason, demoted, and eventually executed. And that's what Cao Rui was going to do now to Sima Yi.

Cao Rui left Cao Zhen in charge, while he personally led 100,000 imperial troops toward Anyi (1,4), a key city inside the territory overseen by Sima Yi. Now word of this movement soon reached Sima Yi, but he didn't know what had transpired, and so had no idea why the emperor was coming his way. He just knew that, hey, if the boss is passing through, I should put on a good show and impress him with how well I've trained his army. So Sima Yi organized tens of thousands of troops and headed out to welcome his lord. But yeah, you can imagine how this looked to Cao Rui.

One of Cao Rui's attendants told him, "Sima Yi is coming with more than 100,000 men to resist your highness. He must be rebelling."

This alarmed Cao Rui, and he immediately dispatched the general Cao Xiu at the head of an army to go take on Sima Yi. When Sima Yi saw Cao Xiu's men coming in the distance, he thought it was the emperor himself, so he dismounted and prostrated on the road to welcome them. But no, it was just the emperor's uncle.

"General Sima, our former lord entrusted you with his heir. Why have you rebelled?" Cao Xiu said to him.

Wait what? But but ... I just thought that ... oh crap. This looks baaad.

Sima Yi was so alarmed that he turned pale and his body was covered in cold sweat as he asked what's going on. Cao Xiu brought him up to speed, and Sima Yi said, "This must be the treachery of spies from Wu and Shu to turn us against each other so that they would have an opening to attack. I will go see his majesty in person and explain."

But first, Sima Yi told his army to get lost so that Cao Rui won't see them and get even more suspicious. He then went to Cao Rui, prostrated in front of his carriage, and said with tears in his eyes, "The former emperor entrusted your highness to your servant, so how can I harbor any stray intentions? This must be the scheming of Wu and Shu. I would like to request permission to lead an army and destroy Shu first, and then conquer Wu, so as to repay the former emperor and your highness and to prove my loyalty."

Cao Rui was understandably suspicious, and the official Hua Xin said, "We cannot give him command of any army. We can strip him of his office and send him home."

Cao Rui thought that was the wiser course of action, so guess what Sima Yi? Enjoy your early retirement. Cao Xiu was put in charge of the armies of Yong and Liang Provinces, and Cao Rui headed home.

When word of this filtered into the Riverlands, Zhuge Liang was ecstatic.

"I have long wanted to attack Wei," he said, "but my only concern was Sima Yi overseeing the forces at Yong and Liang. Now that he has been removed from office, I have no more concerns!"

So the very next morning, when the emperor Liu Shan (4) held court, Zhuge Liang stepped forth and presented a memorial titled "Petition on Taking the Field." Now, this is one of Zhuge Liang's most famous pieces of writing. It's also kind of long, so I won't read the whole thing here. Instead, I'll provide a link to the English text with this episode on the website. Basically, this was Zhuge Liang telling his

young lord, “Look, I’m going on a distant campaign. I’m doing this for your sake, and for the sake of your late father. Don’t screw things up while I’m gone.” There are several central themes to this memorial. First, Zhuge Liang wanted to explain why he wanted to undertake the difficult task of invading the stronger kingdom of Wei, especially when it seems like things are quiet on the homefront. His main reason was that he wanted to finish what Liu Bei had started in order to repay Liu Bei’s kindness to him. Then, he also repeatedly reminds Liu Shan to listen to good advice and stay away from the bad influences that invariably hover around a young emperor. He hits on these themes again and again throughout this piece. The entire memorial contains about 600 characters, and within it, it mentions “First Emperor”, aka Liu Bei, 13 times, “your highness” 7 times, and keeps coming back to the ideas of “repaying the First Emperor” and “the First Emperor’s dying wish.”

So the message is relatively straightforward, but what makes it tricky is that Zhuge Liang may have a lot of power, but he was still the vassal to Liu Shan’s emperor, so he could not come off as lecturing his master. And this memorial has drawn praise in part for the way it walks that fine line, reminding Liu Shan of his duty while remaining respectful at every turn.

So what was Liu Shan’s reaction to this fine piece of writing?

“Minister father,” he said to Zhuge Liang, “You just returned from a difficult and distant Southern campaign and have barely had time to rest. And now you want to march North. I worry you will push yourself too hard.”

“The First Emperor entrusted your highness to me,” Zhuge Liang replied, “and I have never forgotten my duty for an instant. Now that the South is pacified, there are no internal concerns. If we do not attack the traitors and reclaim the Heartlands now, then when?”

But a court official named Qiao (2) Zhou (1) now stepped forth and voiced his reservations.

“I was observing the night sky and saw that the aura of the North was strong and its stars bright. We cannot attack them yet. Your excellency understands the stars well, so why do you insist on going against them?”

“The heavens change often and unpredictably,” Zhuge Liang said. “How can we cling to its patterns? I will garrison my forces in Hanzhong (4,1) first, observe the enemy’s movements, and then act accordingly.”

So Zhuge Liang rejected Qiao Zhou’s entreaties against the expedition. He then set about the business of leaving some good people behind to keep Liu Shan in line. Remember that Zhuge Liang at this point was basically overseeing every single detail of the administration of the kingdom. To make sure those responsibilities were not neglected in his absence, he left a total of more than 100 court officials, led by the likes of Dong (2) Yun (3) and Fei (4) Yi (1), veteran advisers who had accompanied him on his Southern expedition.

Next, Zhuge Liang summoned the officer corps to his residence to hand out assignments for the upcoming campaign. I won’t go into a lot of details here, but suffice it to say that he called on a lot of familiar names, guys like Wei Yan, Wang Ping, Zhang Yi (2), Zhang Yi (4), Ma Dai, and Ma Zhong, people who played key roles in pacifying the South. He also brought along guys like Guan Xing (4) and Zhang Bao (1), the sons of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei respectively, whom we haven’t mentioned in a while because they weren’t on the Southern campaign. He also brought along a bunch of other guys, including Liao (4) Hua (4), another old name who had once served Guan Yu and will now play a more prominent role going forward.

With all the assignments handed out, Zhuge Liang ordered that the army will head out in the third month of the year 227. So everybody snapped to and ... wait, wait, wait just a minute.

There was one conspicuous omission on the officers roll. An old general suddenly stormed in and said loudly, "I may be old, but I still have the courage and valor of legendary warriors Lian (2) Po (1) and Ma (3) Yuan (2). They refused to bow to age, so why are you not giving me an assignment?!"

To see which grumpy old man was yelling at clouds, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!