

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 119.

Last time, Zhuge Liang's Northern campaign had gotten off to a strong start. First He routed and captured the prince consort of the kingdom of Wei, Xiahou Mao. In the process, he captured two counties. He ran into a little bit of difficulty at a third county, Tianshui, where a clever young officer named Jiang Wei had foiled one of his schemes. But no matter. Zhuge Liang just needed to dig a little deeper into his bag of tricks, and next thing you know, Jiang Wei was a man with no home, as the city he was defending fell to Zhuge Liang, who also burned Jiang Wei's bridges with his home base of Tianshui by having someone dress up like him to lead a night attack on Tianshui, making everyone there think he had switched sides.

But as we rejoin our narrative, Jiang Wei was still in the dark about that last part. Having been defeated at the city of Yicheng (4,2), where his mother lived, Jiang Wei was fleeing alone toward his home base of Tianshui. When he got there, he cried out to the guards to let him in. They hurriedly reported this to the governor the city, Ma (3) Zun (1).

"That Jiang Wei is here to trick us into opening the gates again," Ma Zun said, last night's night raid by the imposter Jiang Wei still fresh in his mind.

So instead of being welcomed in, Jiang Wei was greeted with a shower of arrows that forced him to turn back. But as he did so, he saw that the pursuing Shu forces were drawing closer. So he now turned and fled toward Shanggui (4,1), a key city where all the supplies for Tianshui were stored. But when he got there, he found a similar reception.

"Rebel, how dare you try to trick me into giving up my city?! I know you have already surrendered to Shu!" the officer Liang (2) Qian (2), who was overseeing the defense of the city, shouted angrily as he ordered another barrage of arrows to be fired at Jiang Wei.

Twice rebuffed by his own comrades and still in the dark about what's going on, Jiang Wei could do nothing except turn his gaze skyward and sigh as tears streamed from his eyes. With nowhere else to go,

he now pointed his horse in the direction of the key (and distant) city of Changan. But before he had gone far, while he was passing an area with some thick woods, a shout rang out, and a few thousand Shu soldiers appeared, led by the general Guan Xing, blocking Jiang Wei's path.

By now, Jiang Wei was exhausted and could not put up a strong fight, so he turned his horse around and fled. Suddenly, a small carriage appeared from among the hills. Seated in the carriage was a man with a head band, a Daoist robe with crane patterns, yadi yadi yada. Yeah, you know who this was.

"General Jiang, why don't you surrender now?" Zhuge Liang called out.

With Zhuge Liang in front of him and Guan Xing behind him, Jiang Wei saw that there was nowhere to go. After thinking it over for a moment, he dismounted and offered his surrender. Zhuge Liang hurriedly got out of his carriage and took him by the hand.

"Ever since I left my thatched hut, I have been searching for a talented man to whom I can pass my life's knowledge," Zhuge Liang said. "Alas, I had not come across such a person. But now that I have met you, my wish is fulfilled."

So this was no small praise coming from Zhuge Liang, who was basically offering to take Jiang Wei under his wing and teach him everything he knew. Jiang Wei was delighted and bowed in gratitude. The two of them then headed back to camp together to discuss how to conquer the cities of Tianshui and Shanggui.

"The officials Yin (2) Shang (3) and Liang (2) Xu (4) inside Tianshui are my good friends," Jiang Wei said. "I will write two secret letters and shoot them into the city to cause internal dissent. Then the city will be ours."

Zhuce Liang agreed, so Jiang Wei wrote his letters, tied them to arrows, rode to the foot of the city and fired the arrows over the wall. Some soldiers found the arrows and brought them to the governor Ma Zun. Upon reading the letters, Ma Zun became deeply suspicious and discussed it with the prince

consort Xiahou Mao, who, if you remember, had come to Tianshui for refuge after Zhuge Liang intentionally set him free with some fake intel as part of the scheme to force Jiang Wei to surrender.

“Liang Xu (4) and Yin (2) Shang (3) are working with Jiang Wei from the inside,” Ma Zun said to Xiahou Mao. “Commander, you must make a decision quickly.”

“Let's kill them,” Xiahou Mao said.

But won't you know it, no sooner had he said those words did they get picked up and reported to the two men in question.

“Why don't we surrender the city to Shu and join their service instead?” Yin (2) Shang (3) said to Liang Xu (4).

Liang Xu agreed. That night, Xiahou Mao sent one messenger after another to invite the two men to his residence for ... umm ... reasons. The two sensed that now was the time to act, so they donned their armor, grabbed their weapons, and led the troops under their command to fling the city gates wide open and let the Shu army in. Xiahou Mao and Ma Zun were caught off guard, so they scampered out of the west gate with a few hundred men and fled to seek refuge with the Qiang tribes to the northwest.

After entering the city and putting the civilians' minds at ease, Zhuge Liang asked the two turncoat officials how he should go about taking the city of Shanggui. Liang Xu told him, “My younger brother Liang Qian (2) is overseeing that city's defense. I can go convince him to surrender.”

Zhuce Liang was delighted and sent Liang Xu to Shanggui immediately. Sure enough, Liang Qian was convinced to come out and surrender. Zhuge Liang rewarded all three defectors handsomely, putting them in charge of the cities of Tianshui, Yicheng, and Shanggui. Then, Zhuge Liang reorganized his army and prepared to keep moving. But his officers wondered why he wasn't bothering to go after Xiahou Mao.

“When I released Xiahou Mao, it was like freeing a duck,” Zhuge Liang told them. “But now that I’ve gained Jiang Wei, it’s like getting a phoenix!”

So yeah, guess who was Zhuge Liang’s favorite new pet in the officer corps. Anyway, having conquered the three counties in this area, Zhuge Liang’s reputation was, if this was possible, even more greatly enhanced, and all the surrounding cities surrendered when he showed up. So now, Zhuge Liang mobilized all the forces he had garrisoned in the region of Hanzhong and marched them out through Mount Qi (2) and toward the west bank of the River Wei.

Word of these developments soon reached the Wei capital of Luoyang. One day, when the young emperor Cao Rui (4) assembled his court, an official told him, “Prince Consort Xiahou Mao lost three counties and is now hiding with the Qiang tribes. The Shu forces have marched to Mount Qi (2), and their front column has reached the western shore of the River Wei (4). Please send troops to defeat them immediately.”

Cao Rui was alarmed by this news and asked his officials who could go take care of this problem for him. Wang (2) Lang (3), the Minister of the Interior, one of the highest-ranking officials, now stepped forth and said, “I have observed that whenever the former emperor called on Supreme Commander Cao Zhen, he always succeeded. Your highness should make him the grand commander and send him to repel the Shu forces.”

So Cao Rui summoned Cao Zhen and said, “The former emperor entrusted me to you. Now the Shu forces are invading the Heartlands. How can you just sit and watch?”

“Your servant is ignorant and unlearned, not up to the task,” Cao Zhen replied, not exactly exuding the go-getter attitude that Cao Rui was hoping for.

“General,” Wang Lang chimed in, “You are a pillar of the kingdom. You cannot shirk your responsibilities. I may be worn out and unfit for use, but I am willing to accompany you on this campaign.”

So I’m sure Cao Zhen really appreciated Wang Lang backing him into a corner here, but of course, he couldn’t say no, so he told Cao Rui, “Your servant has received immense kindness, so how can I dare to refuse? But I would like to ask for a deputy commander.”

“You may nominate your own choice,” Cao Rui told him. So Cao Zhen nominated a man named Guo (1) Huai (2), who was presently a marquis and the imperial protector of Yong (1) Province. Cao Rui consented and appointed Cao Zhen as grand commander, presenting him with the battle axe that served as his symbol of command, while Guo (1) Huai (2) was appointed the deputy commander and Wang Lang, who at this point was 76 years old, was named the military strategist.

Cao Rui then gave Cao Zhen 200,000 troops. Cao Zhen appointed his cousin Cao Zun (1) to head up the vanguard and the general Zhu (1) Zan (4) as his lieutenant. They headed out in the 11th month of the year 227, with the emperor personally seeing them off outside the west gates of the capital.

Cao Zhen marched his army to the key city of Chang’an, crossed over to the west bank of the River Wei (4), where he set up camp and then met with Wang Lang and Guo Huai about how to repel the invaders. Wang Lang proposed an idea.

“Tomorrow, we can organize our troops and put the army’s might on full display. I will personally go out to the front lines, where, with just one speech, I will convince Zhuge Liang to surrender, and the Shu army will retreat without a fight.”

Cao Zhen was delighted and ordered his troops to get ready to line up in an orderly fashion at the break of dawn, and he then sent a messenger to deliver a letter to the enemy camp, challenging Zhuge Liang to a meeting on the battlefield the next day.

But umm, dude, have you thought this through? Your plan is to, what? Out-talk Zhuge Liang? Well, this should be good.

The next day, both armies lined up on the battlefield in front of Mount Qi (2). When the Shu soldiers looked across the field, they could see that THIS army was vastly different from the one led by Xiahou Mao that they had crushed. This army looked like they were led by someone who knew what he was doing.

After three rounds of drums and horns, Wang Lang rode out on horseback, flanked by Cao Zhen and Guo Huai, while the two vanguard generals held down the ends of the lines. A scout rode out from the Wei lines to the front and shouted, “We request some words with the opposing commander!”

Alright, have it your way. As the Shu forces’ banners parted, the generals Guan Xing and Zhang Bao rode out and took up position on the flanks. Behind them came one officer after another, forming an impressive line. In the shadow of the main banner was a four-wheel carriage. On it sat Zhuge Liang, sporting his head band, feather fan, and a beige robe with a black cord, looking graceful as ever as he was wheeled out to the front.

Looking over to the enemy lines, Zhuge Liang could see three canopies, each with a name written in giant letters on a banner. The one in the middle identified the old man with the white beard as Wang Lang, military strategist and minister of the interior.

“Wang Lang must be here to challenge me to a war of words,” Zhuge Liang thought to himself. “I will respond accordingly.”

Zhuce Liang then ordered his men to push his carriage forward and dispatched a soldier to go out and tell the Wei forces, “The prime minister of the Han will speak with your minister of the interior.”

So Wang Lang rode out, and the two men exchanged gestures of greeting, Zhuge Liang from his seat in the carriage, and Wang Lang from his saddle.

“Sir,” Wang Lang began, “I have long heard of your great name, and today I have the fortune to meet you. You are a man who understands the mandate of heaven and the nature of the times, so why have you launched this invasion without justification?”

“I am bringing traitors to justice by the decree of my lord, how can you say this is unjustified?” Zhuge Liang replied.

“By the turn of heaven’s ordained periods, the sacred instruments of power have changed hands, reverting to a man of virtue, as must happen in the normal course of things,” Wang Lang said. “Since the reigns of Emperors Huan and Ling, the sedition incited by the Yellow Turbans has kept the empire in turmoil. There was the rebellion of Dong Zhuo. Then Li (3) Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (1) continued his savagery. Then Yuan Shu usurped the imperial title in Shouchun (4,1), and Yuan Shao declared himself an independent power in the region of Ye (4). Liu Biao occupied Jing Province. Lü Bu gobbled up Xu Province. Bandits and rebels rose like hornets, and villainous predators hovered above as the sacred shrines stood in peril and the common people faced grave perils.

“Our August Emperor Wu (3) -- and he’s talking about Cao Cao here -- cleansed the realm and took control of its farthest reaches. Millions eagerly pledged to him their allegiance and men from all quarters admired his virtue. This was not by dint of his power and position, but rather because the mandate of heaven had found in him its proper place. Our next sovereign, Cao Pi, the Emperor Wen (2), was divine in civil affairs and sage in the military arts, and he undertook the great succession from the Han in response to heaven and in accord with men, and in keeping with the model of the ancient sages Yao (2) and Shun (4). Was this not the will of heaven and men?

“You, sir, possess immense talent and abilities, comparing yourself to the great statesmen Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4). So why are you defying the divine principle and pushing against true human sentiments in this undertaking? Have you not heard of the ancient saying, ‘Conform to heaven and

prosper; oppose it and fall'? Right now, the kingdom of Wei possesses millions of soldiers and thousands of fine generals. How can the flicker of a firefly in moldering hay rival the clear moon at its zenith? Sir, if you lay down your arms and surrender according to custom, you would receive a title of nobility and bring peace to the land and joy to the people. Would that not be a beautiful thing?"

When Wang Lang finished speaking, Zhuge Liang started laughing out loud.

"I had figured that a venerable minister of the Han court would surely have some keen insight, not such debased words! I have something to say; let all present listen quietly. During the days of the Emperors Huan (2) and Ling (2), the succession of the royal house fell into disorder, and the evils wrought by the eunuchs led to widespread disaster. Misgovernment of the royal house and successive years of famine engulfed all corners of the empire in turmoil. After the Yellow Turbans, the likes of Dong Zhuo, Li Jue, and Guo Si rose up one after another, abducting the Han emperor and brutalizing the common people. Corrupt officials served in the royal house and wild beasts reigned in the imperial court. Men of wolfish hearts and violent conduct had their way, while craven, servile sorts held every kind of office. That was what left the sacred shrines in ruins and the common people on the brink."

Zhugge Liang now pointed his rhetorical sword squarely at Wang Lang.

"I am quite familiar with YOUR conduct. After dwelling by the shore of the eastern sea, you first entered office by being selected for filial devotion and personal integrity. It is unthinkable that you -- you, whose proper function was to shield your sovereign and uphold his house, to secure the Han and to help the Liu clan thrive -- that you should have turned and aided renegades and rebels, plotting with them the usurpation of the dynasty! Heaven and Earth would not tolerate such egregious sins! The people of the realm all want to eat your flesh!

"Fortunately, it is heaven's will that the Han shall not end. Our August emperor -- and he's talking about Liu Bei here -- continued the succession in the Riverlands. And now, on the decree of his



legitimate heir, I am waging a campaign to bring the traitors to justice. For groveling vassals like you, there is nothing for you to do except to hide from sight and try to somehow salvage your miserable means of sustenance. How dare you come before the army and rant about 'changes in heaven's ordained periods?!' White-haired old fool! Gray-bearded villain! You are going to the underworld soon. How can you face the 24 emperors of the Han when you get there?! Away with you, old villain, and tell the rebels to come settle the score with me!"

This blistering repudiation from Zhuge Liang was apparently so powerful that when he heard those words, Wang Lang's chest heaved with rage, until he let out a loud cry and fell dead off his horse. So Zhuge Liang literally killed a man with words -- albeit an old man who probably had a bad heart to begin with. Later, a poet would commend Zhuge Liang thus:

Forth from a land once known as Qin,  
With mettle to match a thousand times ten.  
He came with his light and limber tongue  
And lashed to death the old villain Wang Lang.

Having dispatched Wang Lang with his tongue, Zhuge Liang now pointed at Cao Zhen with his fan and said, "I will not press you. Go organize your troops and we will settle this tomorrow."

Zhuce Liang then had his carriage pushed back inside his own lines, and the two sides returned to camp. Cao Zhen had Wang Lang's body placed in a coffin and sent back to Changan. So let this be a lesson to you: Never start a war of words with Zhuge Liang. I mean, the guy once walked into a room filled with Dongwu's finest academics and shut them all up with his rhetoric. He literally triggered to

death Zhou Yu, aka the smartest man in the empire not named Zhuge Liang. And now, he just trolled Wang Lang to death.

After taking care of Wang Lang's remains, Cao Zhen consulted with his officers about what to do next. His deputy commander Guo Huai said, "Zhuge Liang is expecting our army to be in mourning, so he will no doubt stage a raid tonight. We can divide our forces into four. Two battalions would take the backroads to raid the Shu camp while the enemy's troops are out, and the other two battalions would lie in wait outside our own camp to attack the enemy's raiding party."

"Exactly what I was thinking!" Cao Zhen said with delight. So he summoned his vanguard generals Cao Zun and Zhu Zan and told them, "Take 10,000 men each and swing around to the back of Mount Qi. If you see the enemy troops advance toward my camp, move in to raid their camp. If the enemy troops do not make a move, then just come back. Do not attack rashly."

After the two vanguard generals went on their way, Cao Zhen told Guo Huai, "You and I will each lead an army and lie in wait outside our camp. We will just leave a few people and stockpiles of firewood inside the camp. When the enemy gets here, they will start a fire as the signal."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the battlefield, Zhuge Liang was wheeling and dealing as well. First, he summoned Zhao Yun and Wei Yan and told them, "Each of you will lead the troops from your own unit to raid the enemy camp."

Wei Yan, though, objected. "Cao Zhen is well-versed in military affairs. He will be expecting a raid from us, so how can he not be prepared?"

Zhug Liang smiled and replied, "That's exactly what I'm counting on. Cao Zhen will no doubt hide troops behind Mount Qi to raid our camp once our troops have left. That's why I'm sending the two of you to lead your troops forward. Go past the backroads at the foot of the mountain set up camp a good distance away, so that the enemy feels free to come raid our camp. When you see a fire go up, split your

forces in two. General Wei will hold the approach to the hills, and General Zhao will turn back and prepare for battle. You will no doubt encounter enemy forces. Let them run past you and then attack from behind. They will surely end up fighting each other in the chaos, and total victory will be ours.”

Zhuge Liang then summoned Guan Xing and Zhang Bao and told them, “Each of you will lead an army and hide along the key road on Mount Qi. Let the enemy go past you, then take the path that they took and charge toward the enemy camp.”

Next, Zhuge Liang assigned the generals Ma Dai, Wang Ping, Zhang Yi (2), and Zhang Yi (4) to lead ambushes outside the camp so as to strike the enemy’s raiding party from all directions. Zhuge Liang then set up an empty camp of his own, filled with firewood for starting the fire signal. He then led the rest of the officers to a spot behind the camp to watch for enemy movements.

Around dusk, the Wei vanguard generals Cao Zun and Zhu Zan left their camp and advanced toward the Shu camp. Around 9 o’clock that night, they spotted some enemy troop movements in the hills in the distance. Cao Zun thought to himself, “Commander Guo Huai is a true marvel!”

So, thinking that everything was going exactly according to plan, the two of them pressed their troops forward. They arrived at the Shu camp around midnight. Cao Zun led the way as they stormed into the camp, but, uh oh, nobody’s home.

Recognizing a trap, Cao Zun hurriedly ordered a retreat, but a fire had already flared up in the camp, and a squad of soldiers appeared outside the camp. This must be the ambush, so Cao Zun and his men turned to take on the enemy.

Meanwhile, Zhu Zan, bringing up the rear of the raiding party, arrived and saw that the Shu camp was on fire and that there were troops inside, and he figured this was the enemy, so he and his men attacked.

In the midst of this battle, Cao Zun and Zhu Zan came across each other and went, wait ... it's you ... but I thought that ... and I thought you were ... ah crap. We're fighting each other, aren't we?

While the two of them were trying to order their own men to stand down and join forces rather than cutting each other to bits, loud roars rose up from all around. The REAL enemy had arrived. The Shu generals Wang Ping, Ma Dai, Zhang Yi (2), and Zhang Yi (4) all attacked. Cao Zun and Zhu Zan, with about 100 personal guards, fled toward the main road, but suddenly, they were met with the sound of drums and horns and another enemy force, led by none other than Zhao Yun.

"Where to, rebels?!" Zhao Yun shouted. "Come meet you maker!"

Cao Zun and Zhu Zan had no death wish, so they pushed their way past, but just then came more battle cries as Wei Yan arrived with another army. By the time Cao Zun and Zhu Zan managed to escape from this melee, they were in a sorry state. They sprinted back toward their own camp, but the fun was just getting started.

So remember the other half of Cao Zhen's plan, the part where Cao Zhen and Guo Huai were lying in wait outside their own camp for an enemy raiding party? Well, hey look, here comes a squad of soldiers dashing toward our camp. Here we go!

Cao Zhen dashed out from the left and Guo Huai from the right, striking at the troops that came toward them. This, of course, was the defeated army of Cao Zun and Zhu Zan, so the Wei forces managed to kill each other some more. Then, three Shu armies showed up behind them, led by Wei Yan, Guan Xing, and Zhang Bao, and they put the Wei troops to flight for several miles, killing numerous Wei officers and completing that total victory Zhuge Liang had predicted.

While Zhuge Liang celebrated, Cao Zhen and Guo Huai regrouped their tattered troops and limped back to camp, where they huddled about next steps.

“Victory and defeat are common in war; we should not be too concerned,” Guo Huai said as he tried to console his commander. “I have a plan that will leave the enemy under attack on two sides and force them to leave. The people of the Western Qiang tribes have been paying annual tribute to our kingdom since the times of the Great Ancestor Emperor Wu (3) -- and he’s talking about Cao Cao here. Right now, we should maintain our defense of this strategic point and send messengers to the Qiang tribe to ask for their help. They will no doubt mobilize their forces to attack the enemy’s rear. We can then mobilize our army and attack from the front. That would guarantee a grand victory.”

So Cao Zhen did as Guo Huai suggested and sent a messenger to see the Qiang people and request their aid. To see how Zhuge Liang will deal with this new threat, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!