

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 120.

Last time, Zhuge Liang continued to roll on his Northern campaign. First, he dealt the Wei minister of the interior such a devastating tongue-lashing that the guy literally died on the spot. Then, he outsmarted the Wei grand commander Cao Zhen and dealt him a big defeat. Cao Zhen was beaten so badly that he decided to seek help from the Qiang tribes.

The Qiang people, you may remember, resided around the northwestern frontiers of the empire. They used to be friendly with the Shu general Ma Chao, but ever since Ma Chao was defeated by Cao Cao, the Qiang had pledged their allegiance to Cao Cao and subsequently to the kingdom of Wei. The king of the Qiang nation relied on two top officials. On the civil administration side, he had the prime minister Ya (3) Dan (1). On the military side, he looked to the commander Yue (4) Ji (2).

When Cao Zhen's messenger arrived in the territory of the Qiang, he first went to see this prime minister Ya (3) Dan (1) and presented the gifts and told him the purpose of the visit. Ya Dan then led the envoy to see the king, who read the letter and consulted his staff.

"We have maintained relations with the kingdom of Wei," Ya Dan said. "Now that Commander Cao is requesting our aid, it is only right that we should help."

The king agreed and dispatched Ya Dan and Commander Yue (4) Ji (2) with 150,000 men, who were all skilled in archery, spears and swords, studded mace, and flying hammers. They also had iron wagons, which were war chariots covered in iron armor, and they used these for transporting supplies, using camels and mules to pull the wagons.

Ya Dan and Yue Ji took leave of their lord and made straight for Xiping (1,2) Pass. The Shu officer defending the pass hurriedly sent this intel to Zhuge Liang, who asked which of his officers were willing to go repel the Qiang relief force. Both Guan Xing and Zhang Bao volunteered, but Zhuge Liang was worried that they were not familiar with the geography, so he said to Ma Dai, "You are familiar with the

nature of the Qiang people, and you lived in their territory for a long time. You can go along as the guide.”

So those three generals led 50,000 crack troops and headed toward Xiping (1,2) Pass. After traveling for a few days, they ran into the Qiang forces. Guan Xing led 100-some riders to the top of a hill to take a look, and saw that the Qiang linked their iron war chariots end to end and used them to surround their camp. The wagons were lined with weapons, just like a city. Guan Xing observed this for a long time and could not think of any way to defeat this deployment, so he returned to camp to discuss it with his comrades.

Ma Dai suggested, “When we line up on the battlefield tomorrow, we’ll get a chance to see if they’re for real. Then we can think of a plan.”

The next morning, they divided their troops into three forces and advanced, with Guan Xing leading the center, Zhang Bao on the left, and Ma Dai on the right. The Qiang lined up to face them, and from the ranks of the Qiang troops, Yue (4) Ji (2) galloped out valiantly, wielding a steel hammer and wearing a bow on his waist.

Guan Xing directed all three forces to advance, but suddenly, the Qiang lines opened up to the sides, and from the center charged out the iron wagons, rolling toward the enemy like the tide, accompanied by a hailstorm of arrows. The Shu forces were routed. Ma Dai and Zhang Bao fell back first on the flanks, but Guan Xing and his troops were trapped by the Qiang in the northwest corner of the battlefield.

Guan Xing tried valiantly to break out, but could not as the iron wagons had him sealed up like a city wall. The Shu soldiers lost all order and just scrambled toward a valley. As the dusk fell, they suddenly saw a cluster of black flags swarming this way. The general at their head wielded a steel hammer and shouted at Guan Xing, “Little general, stop! I am Commander Yue (4) Ji (2)!”

Guan Xing spurred on his horse and tried to make a run for it, but his path was cut off by a swift stream. So now, he had no choice but to turn back to face Yue Ji, but by now, Guan Xing's courage had deserted him, and he could not hold his own, so he turned and fled into the stream. Yue Ji, however, caught up to him and made mighty swing with his hammer. Guan Xing quickly ducked and managed to dodge the blow, but the hammer caught his horse square on its hipbone. That horse immediately collapsed in the stream, sending Guan Xing tumbling into the water.

So things were looking dire for Guan Xing. But just as he fell, he suddenly heard a loud noise, and he saw that Yue Ji and his horse also fell into the water, for apparently no reason at all. By the time Guan Xing struggled to his feet, he saw a general on the bank, fighting off the Qiang soldiers. Guan Xing now grabbed his saber and tried to slash at Yue Ji, but Yue Ji managed to leap out of the water and escape. He did, however, leave behind his horse, which Guan Xing happily commandeered.

When Guan Xing got back on land, tidied up, and got on his new horse, he noticed that the general he saw earlier was still chasing off the Qiang soldiers. Guan Xing figured that he should go meet this guy, what with him having saved his life and all. So Guan Xing galloped forth. When he drew near, he saw a warrior amid swirls of mist. This man had a face red as a date and eyebrows that resembled silkworms. He wore a green battle robe and a golden helmet, and he was wielding a green dragon saber and riding a red-hair horse, and he was holding onto his beautiful beard with one hand.

Dad?

Recognizing that the man helping him was none other than his father Guan Yu, Guan Xing was stunned. Suddenly, ghost Guan Yu pointed to the southeast and said, "My son, quickly, follow this path. I will escort you back to camp."

And with that, Guan Yu was gone. Guan Xing quickly followed his direction and headed southeast. He traveled until around midnight, when he ran into a squad of Shu soldiers led by Zhang Bao.

"Did you see your father?" Zhang Bao asked when the two of them met.

“How did you know?” Guan Xing said with surprise.

“I was being pursued by the iron war wagons,” Zhang Bao explained. “Suddenly, I saw your father descend from the sky and scared off the enemy. He then pointed and said, ‘Follow this path to go save my son.’ So I came this way with my men to look for you.”

Guan Xing then relayed his own encounter with ghost Guan Yu acting like one of those overbearing parents at their kids’ soccer games. They then returned to camp together, where they were greeted by Ma Dai.

“We have no way to repel this enemy,” Ma Dai said to them. “I will hold down the camp while you two go inform the prime minister and ask for a way to defeat them.”

So Guan Xing and Zhang Bao headed off immediately and traveled nonstop back to Zhuge Liang to tell him what happened and that, yes, apparently he DOES have to do everything himself. So Zhuge Liang ordered Zhao Yun and Wei Yan to each lead an army and go set up an ambush. He then personally led 30,000 men, along with the officers Jiang Wei and Zhang Yi (4) and accompanied Guan Xing and Zhang Bao back to their camp.

The next day, Zhuge Liang went to a high vantage point to check out the situation. He saw the same impressive line of iron wagons and troops, but he simply said, “It’s not hard to beat this.”

So he first summoned Ma Dai and Zhang Yi (4) and gave them some instructions and sent them on their way. He then summoned Jiang Wei and asked him, “Do you know how to defeat the iron wagons?”

“The Qiang rely only on brute force, how can they understand your ingenious strategy?” replied Jiang Wei, showing that he could lick boots with the best of them.

That made Zhuge Liang smile and say, “You really understand me. Right now the clouds are gathering and the wind is picking up. It’s about to snow, and that’s when I will put my plan into action.”

So Zhuge Liang sent Guan Xing and Zhang Bao off to set up another ambush, and then ordered Jiang Wei to lead some troops to go fight the enemy, with the order that if they encounter any iron chariots,

they were to fall back immediately. Meanwhile, the camp would be occupied only by flags and banners, but no troops.

Soon, it was the end of 12th month of the year, and just as expected, a heavy snow fell. Jiang Wei led his troops out to challenge for combat, and the Qiang commander Yue Ji answered with his iron chariots. Jiang Wei immediately turned and fled, and the Qiang forces gave chase. When they chased Jiang Wei back to the Shu camp, Jiang Wei escaped through the rear of the camp. When the Qiang soldiers arrived outside the camp, they could hear the strumming of a zither, the string instrument that Zhuge Liang was very fond of, from within, but all they could see was an empty camp with banners.

Spooked by this, the Qiang soldiers quickly reported back to their commander, and Yue Ji was suspicious and did not dare to advance lightly. The Qiang prime minister Ya (3) Dan (1), however, said, "This is just Zhuge Liang's deception to make us think there is an ambush. We can attack."

Alright, so Yue Ji led his men to the front of the camp, where they saw Zhuge Liang getting into his carriage with a zither and fleeing through the rear of the camp with a few riders. The Qiang troops stormed into the camp and pursued Zhuge Liang through the mouth of a canyon, where they saw his carriage disappear into some woods.

"With pitiful troops like that, even if there is an ambush, what is there to be afraid of?" Ya Dan said Yue Ji. So Yue Ji ordered his forces to press ahead. But suddenly, a loud noise rang out, sounding like a mountain just collapsed. Except, it wasn't a mountain, but the ground under foot. The Qiang soldiers fell into a hidden trench. And before they could recover, the iron war wagons, which had been pressing ahead at full speed behind the foot soldiers, came crashing down on top of them because they couldn't stop. The rear of the column now tried to turn back, but it was too late.

From the left came Guan Xing, and from the right charged Zhang Bao, leading two hidden armies to attack, accompanied by arrows and bolts from tens of thousands of crossbows. From the rear arrived

three more detachments of Shu forces, led by Jiang Wei, Ma Dai, and Zhang Yi (4). The Qiang troops fell into disarray, and their commander Yue Ji fled toward the canyon behind him. But he ran smack dab into Guan Xing, and this time, within just one bout, Guan Xing let out a loud roar and cut down Yue Ji. Look dad, I can do this myself. No need for you to run out on the field and embarrass me in front of the other kids.

While Guan Xing was busy proving himself to ghost Guan Yu, Ma Dai was busy capturing the Qiang prime minister Ya Dan and bringing him to Zhuge Liang's camp while the Qiang forces scattered. Zhuge Liang now ordered Ya Dan be untied, served him wine, and consoled him with kind words, which deeply touched Ya Dan.

"My lord is the emperor of the Han," Zhuge Liang said to his prisoner. "He has ordered me to bring rebels to justice. Why are you helping the traitors? I will let you go. Please tell your lord that our kingdoms are neighbors and should form an eternal friendship. Do not listen to the words of traitors."

Zhuce Liang then returned all the soldiers, chariots, horses, and weapons that his men had seized during the battle and allowed Ya Dan to take them all back to the Qiang nation. Ya Dan and company bowed in gratitude and took their leave. Zhuge Liang then immediately turned his army back toward his main base at Mount Qi, sending Guan Xing and Zhang Bao on ahead.

Now, back on the other front of this war, the Wei commander Cao Zhen was eagerly awaiting news from the Qiang relief force. Suddenly, his scouts came to report that the Shu forces were packing up and leaving. The deputy commander, Guo Huai, was delighted.

"They must be leaving because of the Qiang attack," he said. So they immediately split up their forces into two and pursued the retreating enemy. They saw up ahead that the Shu soldiers were running in disarray, so the Wei troops pressed forward even harder. But just as the vanguard general Cao Zun (1) was giving chase, he heard the loud, earthshaking sound of drums as an army darted out.

“Rebel, stop!” the general at the head of this army shouted. It was none other than Wei Yan. Cao Zun was shocked, and he did not last three bouts before being cut down by Wei Yan.

Meanwhile, the other vanguard general, Zhu Zan (4), was also giving chase when he stumbled into an ambush led by Zhao Yun, and Zhao Yun needed only one thrust of his spear to finish Zhu Zan.

When Cao Zhen and Guo Huai got word that their vanguard generals were no more, they decided to fall back. But before they could order a retreat, loud roars and the sound of drums and horns rose up from behind, as Guan Xing and Zhang Bao attacked from two sides, trapping Cao Zhen and Guo Huai and really letting them have it. The two Wei commanders managed to fight their way out, but their loss was total. The Shu forces pursued them all the way to the Wei (4) River and seized their camp. Cao Zhen was deeply saddened by the loss of his two vanguard generals, and he now had no choice but to write to his emperor and ask for help. So he wasn't just being humble when he told his emperor that he wasn't up to the task.

When the Wei emperor Cao Rui received this urgent request, he was stunned and asked if anybody had any ideas. The senior official Hua (2) Xin (1) said, “Your highness must personally lead an army to battle, assemble all the nobles, and get everyone to give their all. Only then can we repel the enemy. Otherwise, if the city of Chang’an is lost, then the region inside the passes will be in danger.”

Another official, Zhong (1) Yao (2), now said, “To command men requires superior knowledge. As the great military mind Sun (1) Zi (3) said, Know the enemy, know thyself, and you will never know defeat.’ In my estimation, Cao Zhen may be experienced in war, but he is no match for Zhuge Liang. I will stake the lives of everyone in my family to vouch for one man who can repel the Shu army. Would your majesty approve my recommendation?”

“Sir, you are a senior official of the court,” Cao Rui said. “If there is a talented man who can defeat the enemy, then tell me quick so as to relieve my worries.”

Zhong Yao now said, "In the past, Zhuge Liang had wanted to invade our territory, but he was wary of this man, so he spread rumors to make your highness drive this man away out of suspicion. Only then did Zhuge Liang dare to attack. If you bring back this person now, Zhuge Liang will naturally retreat."

Cao Rui asked whom Zhong Yao was referring to, and Zhong Yao told him, "The General of the Flying Cavalry, Sima Yi."

"[Sigh] I also regret what happened," Cao Rui sighed. "Where is he now?"

"I have heard that he is living in idleness in the city of Wancheng (3,2)," Zhong Yao said.

So Cao Rui immediately dispatched an envoy with a decree, restoring Sima Yi to his former position and adding the title of the Commander who Pacifies the West. The decree also ordered Sima Yi to mobilize the forces in his area and march them to Chang'an. Cao Rui himself would personally go oversee the campaign, and Sima Yi was ordered to rendezvous with him at Chang'an by a certain date.

Meanwhile, on the front lines, Zhuge Liang was secretly feeling rather optimistic given that he had won one engagement after another since his campaign began. One day, he was having a staff meeting at his base at Mount Qi when suddenly, the guards told him that Li (3) Feng (1), the son of the Shu official Li Yan (2), had come to see him on the order of his father. Now Li Yan was stationed at the key city of Baidi (2,4) on the eastern borders of the Shu kingdom, where he was to keep an eye on the frenemy kingdom of Wu to make sure that this supposed ally didn't try any funny business while Zhuge Liang was away campaigning in the North. So now, Zhuge Liang could only assume that Li Yan had sent his son here because Wu was up to no good, so he summoned Li Feng with concern.

"I come bearing great news!" Li Feng said.

"What is this great news?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"Previously, the former Shu general Meng Da surrendered to Wei because he had no choice. When Cao Pi was alive, Meng Da received his favor and was awarded with riches, once allowed to share Cao

Pi's royal carriage, and given prestigious ranks, as well as the governorship of the city of Xincheng (1,2) and oversight of the southwestern region of Wei. But many in the Wei court are jealous of Meng Da, and since Cao Pi's death and Cao Rui's ascension to the throne, Meng Da has been restless. He often tells his officers, 'I used to be a Shu general, and my present situation is not by choice.' So he sent his confidant to deliver a letter to my father, asking him to send it on to your excellency. Before, when Wei tried to wage a five-prong attack on our kingdom, Meng Da had already wanted to do this. And now, he is stationed at Xincheng (1,2) and has heard that your excellency is invading Wei. So he wants to mobilize the forces of the cities of Jincheng (1,2), Xincheng (1,2), and Shangyong (4,1) to turn against the Wei and make straight for the Wei capital Luoyang while your excellency attack Chang'an. That would give us control of both important cities. I have brought Meng Da's envoy and the numerous letters he has submitted to my father."

So let's hit pause for second. Meng Da is a name we have not heard in awhile, so here's quick refresher: He used to serve Liu Zhang (1), the former lord of the Riverlands. But he was one of the three original conspirators who schemed to deliver the region to Liu Bei. So when Liu Bei gained control of the Riverlands, Meng Da was riding high. But his standing with Liu Bei began to slip later on, and things really hit the fan when Guan Yu, in his most desperate hour, reached out to Meng Da and Liu Bei's adopted son Liu Feng for help. Meng Da was the one who convinced Liu Feng to refuse his uncle's request, thus contributing to Guan Yu's demise. Needless to say, this landed him on Liu Bei's hit list when the latter set out to avenge Guan Yu, but before Liu Bei could get to him, Meng Da decided to surrender to Wei, sending a resignation letter to Liu Bei in which he made a big to-do about hey let's part ways while we're still on good terms, yadi yada. Well, I guess now he was discovered that the grass really isn't greener on the other side. Really, the man just strikes me as a serial defector with a loose grasp on the concept of loyalty.

Meng Da's questionable past notwithstanding, this was amazing news for Zhuge Liang. Think about it. While he is cruising along on the western borders of Wei, Meng Da is now offering to turn this campaign into a two-prong assault on the two most important locations in Wei. And since the Wei forces were already stretched thin trying to fend off Zhuge Liang, they are going to be in dire straits if they have to race back to save their capital as well. So Zhuge Liang was delighted and rewarded Li Feng handsomely for bringing this good news.

But the good vibes did not last long. Just then, spies brought another set of intel: Cao Rui was marching toward Chang'an, and in the meantime, he has restored Sima Yi to his former position plus a promotion, ordering him to mobilize the troops in his region to rendezvous at Chang'an.

When he heard this, Zhuge Liang was greatly alarmed. His adviser Ma Su (4) asked, "What is there to be afraid of? If Cao Rui comes to Chang'an, then we can use that opportunity to capture him. Why is your excellency so alarmed?"

"I am not worried about Cao Rui," Zhuge Liang explained. "The only person I'm worried about is Sima Yi. Right now, Meng Da is plotting an uprising, but if he runs into Sima Yi, he will be defeated for sure. Meng Da is no match for Sima Yi. If they face off, Meng Da would be captured. If he dies, then it would be difficult to take the Heartlands."

"Why don't you write an urgent letter to Meng Da telling him to be on guard against Sima Yi?" Ma Su suggested. Zhuge Liang agreed and immediately wrote a letter and gave it to Meng Da's envoy and told him to take it back with all due haste.

So now, let's skip on over to visit Meng Da in the city of Xincheng (1,2). He had been anxiously awaiting the return of his envoy, and one day, that envoy came back and presented the letter from Zhuge Liang. It said,

“Sir, your recently letter was ample evidence of your loyal and honorable heart. I am delighted that you have not forgotten our old ties. If we succeed, then you will be the one most responsible for the revitalization of the Han Dynasty. But we must proceed discreetly. Do not trust anyone lightly. Be on guard; be forewarned. I have recently heard that Cao Rui has recalled Sima Yi to mobilize the forces of Wancheng (3,2) and Luoyang. If he hears about your uprising, then he will rush to you. Please take every precaution. Do not treat this as something routine.”

When Meng Da finished reading this letter, he just laughed.

“Everyone says Zhuge Liang is overly cautious, and this proves it.”

He then wrote a letter and sent his confidant back to Zhuge Liang. This reply said,

“Having received this weighty charge, I dare not relax. But as far as Sima Yi is concerned, there is no need to worry. Wancheng is more than 250 miles from Luoyang and 400 miles from where I am. If Sima Yi hears about my insurrection, he would have to first inform Cao Rui before taking action. That back-and-forth would take a month, and by then my city will be well-fortified and my officers and troops will be stationed in strategically advantageous positions. If Sima Yi comes my way, what need have I to fear him then? Your excellency need not worry; just wait for my good news.”

Oh boy. This is not sounding so good, and Zhuge Liang thought as much. When he finished reading the letter, he threw it to the ground and stamped his foot.

“Meng Da will die at Sima Yi’s hand for sure!” he lamented.

“Why does your excellency say that?” the adviser Ma Su asked.

“As the art of war says, ‘Attack the enemy where he’s unprepared; appear where he does not expect you.’ How can you expect to have a month’s time? Since Cao Rui has delegated authority to Sima Yi, he will clear out rebels wherever he finds them. Why would he wait until he has informed Cao Rui? If he

hears about Meng Da's insurrection, his troops would get there in less than 10 days, long before Meng Da is ready."

This explanation convinced everyone in the tent. Unfortunately, it's the guy not in the tent that Zhuge Liang was worried about. He hurriedly instructed Meng Da's messenger, "Tell your master, 'Until you act, let no one know your thoughts, or defeat would be certain.'" The messenger then took his leave and hurried back toward Xincheng.

Now, let's go back in time just a bit and see what Sima Yi had been up to during his involuntary early retirement. The answer was ... not much. Residing in idleness in Wancheng, he did manage to stay abreast of the news, and when he heard that the Wei forces had suffered one defeat after another against Shu, he would look skyward and sigh.

Now Sima Yi had two sons, the elder named Sima Shi (1), and the younger named Sima Zhao (1), and both were men of great ambitions and well-versed in military texts. One day, as they were standing next to their father, they saw him let out another long sigh, and they asked him why.

"How can the likes of you understand such important affairs?" Sima Yi said dismissively.

"Are you sighing over the fact that the the Lord of Wei refused your service?" the elder son, Sima Shi, asked.

"They'll come summon father sooner or later," the younger son Sima Zhao said with a smile.

And sure enough, before he was done talking, Cao Rui's envoy arrived, delivering the decree that recalled Sima Yi to service and ordered him to rendezvous at Chang'an. But just then, another man showed up. He was a servant of Shen (1) Yi (2), the governor of one of the three cities whose forces that Meng Da had planned to enlist in his uprising. So yeah, there goes your secret rebellion.

To see who will win this race against time with the fate of the Wei kingdom hanging in the balance, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.