

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 121.

Last time, Zhuge Liang had easily brushed aside every foe in his way as he marched his army north on a campaign to conquer the kingdom of Wei. What's more, he got some great news when the former Shu general Meng Da, who had defected to Wei, wrote to him offering to defect back to Shu and lead his men in a secret uprising deep inside Wei territory, which would spell big trouble for Wei.

But just as things were looking good, Zhuge Liang got the disconcerting news that the Wei emperor, in this desperate hour, had recalled to service the veteran official Sima Yi, whom he had dismissed a while back on suspicions of disloyalty, suspicions that, by the way, Zhuge Liang had vigorously fanned in order to get Sima Yi out of the way before launching his Northern expedition.

As we pick up where we left off, we are in the city of Wancheng (3,2), where Sima Yi had just received the imperial decree ordering him to mobilize the troops in the city and go rendezvous with his emperor in the key city of Chang'an, where they would figure out how to repel Zhuge Liang.

Shortly after receiving this decree, Sima Yi had a visitor. This guy was a servant from the household of Shen (1) Yi (2), the governor of Jincheng (1,2), one of the cities under the jurisdiction of the soon-to-be-double-defector Meng Da. This servant told Sima Yi that his master had sent him to deliver top-secret intel about Meng Da's treasonous plot, and that this was corroborated by Meng Da's confidant and his nephew, who were actually the first ones to turn him in.

When Sima Yi heard this, he put his hands to his head in a gesture of gratitude and said, "Our lord is blessed indeed. Zhuge Liang's victories at Qi Mountain has demoralized everyone, and his majesty has no choice but to personally go to Chang'an. If he had not recalled me, and Meng Da rose up in rebellion, both Chang'an and the capital Luoyang would be lost! This scoundrel Meng Da must be conspiring with Zhuge Liang. I will capture him first. That will deter Zhuge Liang, and he will fall back."

His eldest son, Sima Shi (1) said, "Father, you must write a memorial informing the emperor at once."

“If we wait for an imperial edict before taking action, it would take a month and there would be nothing we can do by then,” Sima Yi said. So not only did he order the troops to set out immediately, he also ordered that they must march on the double and that any delay would result in a lot of heads being lopped off. At the same time, showing off a little bit of his wiley side, Sima Yi sent a messenger on ahead to Xincheng (1,2), Meng Da’s home base, to tell Meng Da that Sima Yi was rounding up troops on his way to rendezvous with the emperor and that Meng Da should get ready to join him. This was designed to make Meng Da think Sima Yi still hadn’t caught on to his planned rebellion so that he would let his guard down.

After the messenger sped off to carry out this charade, Sima Yi rounded up his forces and marched out. After traveling for a couple days, he ran into another Wei army, led by Xu Huang. Now, Xu Huang is a name we haven’t heard in a while. He was one of the top warriors in that original cast of officers who helped Cao Cao conquer his piece of the empire, and by now he had risen to the General of the Right.

“Commander,” Xu Huang said to Sima Yi, “His majesty has gone to Chang’an to personally repel the enemy. Where are you headed?”

“Meng Da is rebelling, so I am on my way to capture him,” Sima Yi whispered.

Hearing this, Xu Huang immediately volunteered to serve as the vanguard, and Sima Yi was delighted. So Xu Huang headed up the front of the army, with Sima Yi in the center, and Sima Yi’s two sons bringing up the rear.

After a couple more days of travel, fortune smiled on Sima Yi yet again. The front column reported that their scouts had captured the messenger that Meng Da had sent to Zhuge Liang. The guy was on his way back to see Meng Da to relay Zhuge Liang’s warning for him to be on the lookout for a surprise attack from Sima Yi, but that message was not going to get delivered now. The scouts who captured the guy searched him and found the letter from Zhuge Liang, so they brought the prisoner and the letter to Sima Yi.

"I won't kill you if you tell me everything," Sima Yi said.

So the messenger spilled the beans about the entire exchange between Meng Da and Zhuge Liang. Sima Yi then read Zhuge Liang's letter and was stunned at how eerily accurate Zhuge Liang was in predicting his movements.

"Great minds think alike," Sima Yi said in astonishment. "Zhuge Liang foresaw my plan, but thanks to his majesty's great fortune, this intel has fallen into my hands. Now, there is nothing Meng Da can do."

So he ordered the army to resume its march on the double, and they traveled through the night.

Meanwhile, at Meng Da's base at the city of Xincheng (1,2), the secret rebellion that everyone had heard about was proceeding apace. Meng Da reached out to Shen (1) Yi (2) and Shen (1) Dan (1), brothers who were governors of two neighboring cities, to arrange for a date on which they would all rise up together. But of course, remember that Shen Yi (2) had already ratted him out to Sima Yi, so the Shen brothers just played along, pretending to drill their troops every day but telling Meng Da that, "Umm, sorry, we are still trying to get our weapons and provisions ready. When will we be ready? Hmm, we can't give you a firm date yet. Just bear with us for a little bit longer." And incredibly, Meng Da believed them.

Then one day, a messenger from Sima Yi arrived. Meng Da welcomed him in, and this messenger said, "By his majesty's decree, Commander Sima is mobilizing troops in the area to join him in repelling the invaders. Governor, you should organize your forces and wait for orders for deployment."

"When is the commander heading out?" Meng Da asked.

"Right now he is likely leaving Wancheng and on his way to Chang'an," the messenger replied.

When he heard this, Meng Da secretly rejoiced, because that meant Sima Yi was still in the dark and not going to be able to get here in time to stop his rebellion. So he treated the messenger to a banquet

and saw him off. Then he immediately sent word to the Shen brothers that this rebellion thing is happening tomorrow, and that together they would all march on the Wei capital Luoyang.

But just then, word came that there was a huge dust cloud in the distance and an army -- they didn't know who -- was approaching the city. Meng Da went to the city walls to take a look, and he saw an army flying toward the city, sporting banners that said, "Xu Huang, General of the Right."

Surprise, surprise. Meng Da was stunned and immediately ordered the drawbridge be raised. Meanwhile, Xu Huang was spurring his horse on so hard that he couldn't stop until he had reached the edge of the moat.

"Meng Da, you rebel! Surrender now!" Xu Huang shouted from his saddle.

An angry Meng Da responded not with words, but with an arrow. Xu Huang could not dodge this surprise cheap shot quickly enough, and the arrow struck him in the head. His subordinates hurriedly rescued him and carried him off, while his army fell back amid a torrent of arrows from the city.

Meng Da now wanted to open the gates to give chase, but before he could do that, the main army commanded by Sima Yi arrived, their ranks so numerous that their banners blocked out the sun.

"[Sigh] It's just as Zhuge Liang had predicted," Meng Da sighed as he ordered the gates to be shut and hunkered down for a defensive stand.

So Meng Da was trapped inside his city, but let's now skip over to Sima Yi's camp to check in on Xu Huang, who took an arrow to the head. The army surgeon removed the arrow tip and tried to treat him, but to no avail. That very night, Xu Huang breathed his last at the age of 59. So there goes another of the old guard. Sima Yi sent some men to escort Xu Huang's coffin back to the capital for burial while he tended to the business at hand.

The next morning, Meng Da looked out from the city wall and saw that the Wei forces had surrounded him like a wall, which made him restless. Just then, though, he spotted two armies dashing

onto the scene. Their banners bore the names of the Shen brothers. Ah, here come my comrades to the rescue, Meng Da thought.

Rounding up his own troops, Meng Da dashed out of the city to join his fellow conspirators in attacking Sima Yi. But to his dismay, the Shen brothers shouted to him, "Rebel, stop! Your death is at hand!"

Seeing that his comrades had turned on him, Meng Da tucked tail and ran back toward the city. But before he could get back inside, he was met with a shower of arrows from above. Standing on the wall, his confidant and his nephew shouted at him, "We have already surrendered this city!"

Wait, you guys too? So who WASN'T in on this betray-the-betrayer scheme? Exhausted and outnumbered, Meng Da now tried to fight his way out, but one of the Shen brothers caught up to him, stabbed him off his horse with one thrust of the spear, and cut off his head. The rest of Meng Da's soldiers all surrendered on the spot, while the defectors inside the city threw open the gates to welcome in Sima Yi. Just like that, Meng Da and his rebellion were dead, and so was Zhuge Liang's best hope for a quick conquest of the kingdom of Wei.

After he assured the civilians that they weren't going to be massacred and rewarded the army, Sima Yi sent word of what had transpired to his emperor, Cao Rui. Cao Rui was delighted when he heard about the foiled treason plot. He had Meng Da's head taken to the capital for public display, promoted the Shen brothers and assigned them to accompany Sima Yi on his campaign, and made Meng Da's confidant and nephew governors of the cities that the Shen brothers had been overseeing. Then, Sima Yi resumed marching toward his rendezvous with his emperor at the city of Chang'an.

When he arrived at his destination, he set up camp and went into the city to see Cao Rui, who was delighted to see him.

“I was muddle-headed for a moment and fell for our enemy’s trick, which I regret greatly,” he told Sima Yi. “If not for you, Meng Da’s rebellion would have doomed both Chang’an and our capital Luoyang.”

“When I received the report of Meng Da’s rebellion, I wanted to inform your highness,” Sima Yi said. “But I was worried that the back-and-forth would take too long, so I set off without your edict. If I had waited, we would have fallen for Zhuge Liang’s scheme.”

As he spoke, Sima Yi offered up Zhuge Liang’s letter to Meng Da. Cao Rui read it and was very pleased.

“Your knowledge is greater than that of the greatest strategists of old,” he told Sima Yi. Cao Rui then bestowed upon Sima Yi a pair of golden axes, giving him the authority to act as he saw fit without having to inform the emperor first should important matters like this arise again. Cao Rui then ordered Sima Yi to lead his troops out of the passes that protected the Heartlands to defeat the Shu invasion force.

“I would like to recommend a general to serve as my vanguard,” Sima Yi said to Cao Rui.

“Whom are you recommending?”

“Zhang He, General of the Right, is up to this task.”

“That’s whom I was going to appoint,” Cao Rui said with a smile, and so he appointed Zhang He as the vanguard and sent him and Sima Yi off on their mission.

So we haven’t really mentioned Zhang He in a while. He is really the last surviving member of that original group of generals who followed Cao Cao on his campaigns, with the rest all having succumbed to old age or died in battle. I think the last time we heard his name mentioned, it was when Liu Bei and Cao Cao were fighting over the region of Hanzhong. Zhang He didn’t fare too well in that war, but he was still a fierce warrior, and now a senior statesman in the Wei officer corps.

While Cao Rui sent Sima Yi and Zhang He off, he also dispatched another army of 50,000, led by Xin (1) Pi (2) and Sun (1) Li (3), to go help Cao Zhen, the supreme commander of the Wei forces who had

been getting his butt kicked by Zhuge Liang. We'll get back to Cao Zhen in due time, but for now, let's follow Sima Yi and Zhang He. The two of them led 200,000 men out through the mountain passes and set up camp. They then huddled to plan their next move.

Sima Yi said, "Zhuge Liang has always been cautious and would not dare to act rashly. If it were me, I would have moved through Ziwu (2,3) Gorge toward Chang'an, and I would have arrived long ago."

And this by the way, was exactly the plan that the Shu general Wei Yan had suggested to Zhuge Liang but got shot down. So maybe Wei Yan could at least console himself knowing that at least SOMEBODY thought his plan was a good idea.

"Zhuge Liang is not stupid," Sima Yi continued, "he's just cautious and did not want to take that risk. So now he must be marching his troops out of Xie (2) Gorge to take the city of Meicheng (2,2). If he takes Meicheng (2,2), he would split his army in two, with one of them going to take Ji (1) Gorge. I have already sent word to Commander Cao Zhen, asking him to defend Meicheng and to not go out to fight should the enemy show up there. I have also ordered Sun (1) Li (3) and Xin (1) Pi (2) to cut off the mouth of Ji (1) Gorge and to launch a surprise attack if the enemy goes that way."

"And which route will you take to move your troops forward?" Zhang He asked.

"I know that there is a road to the west of the Qin (2) Mountains, at a place called Jieting (1,2). Next to it is a city called Liucheng (3,2). Both of these are critical points in the region of Hanzhong. Zhuge Liang figures Cao Zhen would be unprepared, so he will no doubt take that route. You and I will head to Jieting (1,2), which would put us near the crucial Yangping (2,2) Pass. Zhuge Liang knows that if I cut off his path at Jieting, it would cut off his supply route, and the entire area of Longxi (3,1) would be indefensible. He would then retreat back to Hanzhong immediately. When he retreats, I will launch an attack along the backroads, and total victory would be ours. If he does not retreat, then I will block off all the backroads, and his army will starve to death in a month, and Zhuge Liang shall be mine."

Zhang He was greatly impressed by this plan, so much so that he kneeled on the ground and said, "Commander, your plan is divine!"

"That may be so, but Zhuge Liang is no Meng Da," Sima Yi said. "General, as the vanguard, you must not advance rashly. Tell your officers to send men to scout the roads deep into the mountains. Only when you are certain there is no ambush can you advance. Otherwise, you would surely fall into Zhuge Liang's trap."

Now, let's skip on over to the Shu side and check in on Zhuge Liang, who was presently in his home base in the Qi (2) Mountain. One day, he got a visit from a spy from Meng Da's city. This guy told him, "Sima Yi marched on the double and arrived at the city in just eight days. Meng Da was caught unprepared, and he was also betrayed by his own men. Meng Da was killed in the fighting, and Sima Yi then went to Chang'an to rendezvous with the Lord of Wei. He and the general Zhang He have led an army out through the passes to resist us."

This intel greatly alarmed Zhuge Liang.

"Meng Da did not keep his plan a secret, so it's no surprise that he has been killed. Now that Sima Yi has come out from the passes, he will no doubt head straight for Jieting (1,2) to cut off our army's lifeline. Who is willing to go defend Jieting?"

Zhuce Liang had barely finished asking that question when the military counselor Ma (3) Su (4) volunteered. Now, Ma Su is somebody that Zhuge Liang had known for a long time, and Zhuge Liang valued his advice, but Zhuge Liang was rather apprehensive about sending him on this mission.

"Jieting may be small, but it is extremely important," he told Ma Su. "If Jieting is lost, our entire army would be doomed. Even though you understand strategy well, Jieting has neither a city nor a geographic barrier, making it extremely difficult to defend."



“I have been well-versed in military texts since my youth and thoroughly understand the art of war,” Ma Su replied. “How can I not be able to defend a little place like Jieting?”

“But Sima Yi is no common foe,” Zhuge Liang said. “Besides, his vanguard general Zhang He is a famous warrior in the kingdom of Wei. I fear that you would not be a match.”

“Even if Cao Rui himself went to Jieting, I would not be afraid, much less the likes of Sima Yi and Zhang He,” Ma Su boasted. “If I fail, you may execute my entire family.”

“There are no jokes in the army,” Zhuge Liang cautioned, trying to give Ma Su one last chance to back out, but Ma Su would not hear of it.

“I am willing to write a military pledge,” he declared.

[Sigh] Well, alrighty then. Since Ma Su was so eager and determined that he would stake the lives of his whole family on the outcome of this assignment, Zhuge Liang acquiesced. After Ma Su wrote his pledge, Zhuge Liang said, “I will give you 25,000 crack troops, plus a top general to help you.”

He then turned to the general Wang Ping and said, “I know that you have always been cautious, so I am entrusting you with this important assignment. You must defend this place carefully. You must set up camp at a key point on the road so that the enemy cannot sneak past you. Once you have set up camp, draw up a map of the area and send it to me for review. You must discuss every move thoroughly before taking action. Do not take rash actions. If you can safeguard this location, it would be the top merit when we capture the city of Chang’an, so be very, very careful.”

So after much nagging by Zhuge Liang, Ma Su and Wang Ping set off with their troops. But Zhuge Liang was still feeling uneasy, so he told the general Gao (1) Xiang (2), “There is a city to the northeast of Jieting, called Liucheng (3,2). It is located on a backroad in the mountains and is suitable for garrisoning troops. I will give you 10,000 men to go garrison that city. If Jieting is threatened, go help them.”

But after Gao Xiang left, Zhuge Liang was still restless. He thought to himself: Gao Xiang is no match for Zhang He. I must send a top general to garrison troops to the right of Jieting as a safeguard. So he

ordered the general Wei Yan, who at this point was basically his mightiest warrior, to lead his own unit and go watch the rear of Jieting. But Wei Yan was nonplussed by this assignment.

“I am the vanguard general,” he objected. “I should be leading the attack against the enemy. Why are you sending me to a place so far removed from the action?”

“Leading the charge is the work of a second-tier officer,” Zhuge Liang said. “I am sending you to reinforce Jieting, which is the most crucial road to Yangping Pass. It is the throat of the region of Hanzhong. This is a huge assignment, not at all an idle posting. Don’t underestimate it and ruin my grand plans. Be very very careful!”

Well, that explanation cheered up Wei Yan, and he went on his way. Only now did Zhuge Liang feel a little more at ease. He then summoned the officers Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi and told them, “Now that Sima Yi is leading the enemy troops, everything has changed. You two will each lead an army out through Ji (1) Gorge as decoys. If you encounter the enemy, no matter if you fight or not, you would put them on edge. I will lead the main army and march through Xie (2) Gorge to take the city of Meicheng (2,2). If I can capture it, then Chang’an is within our grasp.”

Once Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi headed off, Zhuge Liang ordered Jiang Wei to lead his vanguard and head out through Xie (2) Gorge.

So Zhuge Liang just sent out like five different armies. Let’s follow the first one, led by Ma Su and Wang Ping. When they arrived at Jieting and scoped out the area, Ma Su laughed and said, “His excellency worries too much. How would the enemy dare to come attack such a hilly location?”

“Even so, we should set up camp right where all the roads converge,” said Wang Ping, sounding a note of caution. “Let’s order the men to cut timber and build a strong stockade to prepare for a permanent stay.”

“The road is no place to pitch camp,” Ma Su replied. “I see a hill off to the side there. It is isolated and thick with trees. That is a heaven-sent location. We should garrison the troops on the hill.”

Sigh. Look man, what did Zhuge Liang say before you left? PITCH ... CAMP ... ON ... THE ... ROAD! But here was Ma Su, getting too clever by half.

“You’re mistaken, counselor,” Wang Ping said. “If we garrison the troops on the road and set up a strong wall, even 100,000 enemy soldiers would not be able to sneak around us. But if we abandon the road and garrison on the hill, what would we do if the enemy comes in force and surrounds the hill?”

But Ma Su just laughed dismissively. “That is the view of a woman! As the rules of war say, ‘When one looks down from a superior position, one can overcome the enemy as easily as cleaving bamboo.’ If the enemy comes, I will teach them a lesson!”

Wang Ping, though, would not back down.

“I have long followed his excellency on campaigns. Whenever we arrive at a place, he would explain the topography to us in detail. In my view, that hill is a deathtrap. If the enemy cuts off our water supply, our soldiers would fall into disarray without a fight.”

“Enough of your nonsense!” Ma Su snapped. “As the great strategist Sun Zi said, ‘Victory lies in desperate positions.’ If the enemy cuts our water supply, how can our troops do anything but put up a dogged fight? Then one of our men would be the equal of 100 enemy soldiers. I am well-versed in military texts, and his excellency always consults me on everything. How dare you presume to question me?”

This argument was going nowhere, but Wang Ping would not let it go. He now said, “If you insist on setting up camp on the hill, then let’s split up, and I will lead some troops and set up an auxiliary camp to the west of the hill, so that if the enemy comes, we can reinforce each other.”

But Ma Su still refused. Just then, though, they saw large groups of civilians from the mountains fleeing this way, carrying news that the Wei army was approaching. Wang Ping now insisted on going his own way, and finally, Ma Su relented.

“Since you refuse to obey my order, I will give you 5,000 men to go set up your own camp,” he told Wang Ping. “But after I defeat the enemy, you will not get any share of the credit!”

Wang Ping didn’t care about getting credit; he just wanted to make sure there won’t be any blame to go around when all was said and done. So he took his 5,000 men and set up camp about three miles away from the hill. He then drew up a map of the area and sent a courier to deliver it posthaste to Zhuge Liang, telling him that Ma Su insisted on camping on the hill.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi had dispatched his younger son Sima Zhao (1) to scout out the road ahead, with instructions to stop if he discovered enemy troops defending Jieting. Sima Zhao made his rounds and reported back that there were indeed enemy forces at Jieting.

“[Sigh] Zhuge Liang really is divine,” Sima Yi sighed. “I am not his equal.”

But Sima Zhao laughed and said, “Father, why are you discouraging yourself? In my view, taking Jieting is easy.”

“Why do you make such a boast?” Sima Yi asked.

“I saw with my own eyes that there was no camp on the road. The enemy troops were garrisoned on a hill. That’s why I know we can defeat them.”

“If that is the case, then this is help from heaven!” a delighted Sima Yi rejoiced.

See, this is why when Zhuge Liang tells you to do A, you do NOT go out and do B just because you think you know better. To see how disastrous Ma Su’s little ego trip will turn out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.