

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 123.

Last time, some dumb moves by the strategist Ma Su doomed Zhuge Liang's Northern expedition, as Sima Yi captured several key locations and threatened to wipe out Zhuge Liang's entire army. Some clever deployments and one daring bluff later, Zhuge Liang had managed to pull his entire army back to safety inside his own kingdom. But all the territory he had gained on the campaign was gone again. The Wei commanders Cao Zhen and Guo Huai recovered the three counties that Zhuge Liang had captured, claiming a measure of credit after getting their butts kicked by him earlier.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi returned to the hamlet of Xicheng (1,2), where he and his massive army of 150,000 had turned and run at the sight of Zhuge Liang calmly strumming his zither because Sima Yi had suspected an ambush. But now, after questioning some locals, Sima Yi learned that Zhuge Liang only had 2,500 soldiers in the town at the time, with no generals, a staff of civil officials, and definitely no ambush. Furthermore, the locals told him that the Shu forces he had encountered in the mountains while retreating were just decoys.

Lamenting a missed opportunity, Sima Yi looked skyward and said, "[Sigh] I am no match for Zhuge Liang!"

But even so, Sima Yi had managed to end Zhuge Liang's Northern campaign. When he led his army back to the city of Chang'an, the Wei emperor Cao Rui told him, "It is all thanks to you that we have recovered the lost territory."

"The Shu forces are currently in Hanzhong and not yet exterminated," Sima Yi replied. "I would like to request a large army to conquer the Riverlands and repay your kindness."

Cao Rui appreciated the eagerness and was just about to grant Sima Yi his request, but an official named Sun (1) Zhi (1) spoke up.

“I have a plan that can conquer both the kingdoms of Shu and Wu. Many years ago, your great ancestor Cao Cao conquered Hanzhong but paid a heavy price. He would often say to us, ‘The Hanzhong capital of Nanzheng (2,4) is harder to enter than a prison designed by heaven itself.’ Along the Xie (2) Gorge you will find rock caves for nearly 200 miles. It is no place to wage a war. If your highness mobilize all our forces now to invade Shu, then the kingdom of Wu will encroach on our borders. The better course of action is to assign our current field forces and top generals to hold key passes to the west, while we rebuild our fighting strength. Within a few years, our kingdom will be prosperous, and our rivals will be mortal enemies again. That will be the time to go after Shu. Please think about it.”

Cao Rui asked Sima Yi what he thought of this plan, and Sima Yi said sure that sounds fine too. So Cao Rui ordered Sima Yi to assign officers to key locations while leaving Guo Huai and Zhang He to oversee the defense of Chang’an. Cao Rui then rewarded the army and headed back to his capital at Luoyang.

Now, let’s go to Hanzhong and check in on Zhuge Liang and company. Upon returning to his home base, Zhuge Liang did a headcount and realized that the officers Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi were still missing. He was concerned and was just about to send out men to look for them when Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi showed up, not having lost a single soldier or any equipment on their retreat. A delighted Zhuge Liang led the officer corps out to welcome them. When Zhao Yun saw him, he quickly dismounted and fell to his knees.

“I am a defeated officer, not worthy of your excellency coming out so far to receive me,” he said.

Helping Zhao Yun to his feet, Zhuge Liang clasped his hand and said, “It was my failure to distinguish the wise from the foolish that led to this debacle. Every unit has suffered casualties except yours. How?”

Deng Zhi chimed in and said, "I led our forces ahead while General Zhao singlehandedly brought up the rear, slaying enemies and striking fear into them. That is why we did not lose any equipment or men."

"A true general," Zhuge Liang praised. He then bestowed 50 pounds of gold and 10,000 bolts of silk on Zhao Yun as a reward, but Zhao Yun refused.

"The army has not yet accomplished anything, and we all bear a share of the responsibility for that," he said. "If you reward me now, it would confuse your excellency's standards for reward and punishment. Please keep these in storage for now and give them to the troops come winter."

Impressed, Zhuge Liang said, "The First Emperor always praised General Zhao's virtue, and deservedly so!"

Zhuce Liang's tone changed soon enough, though, when the officers Ma Su, Wang Ping, Wei Yan, and Gao Xiang reported to base. These were the guys right in the middle of the debacle that cost Zhuge Liang his campaign, so somebody was going to pay.

First, Zhuge Liang summoned Wang Ping into the tent and scolded him, "I sent you to help Ma Su defend JiETING. Why did you not advise him and instead allowed this defeat to happen?"

"I tried time and again to change his mind," Wang Ping countered. "I told him we must build an earthen wall on the road and set up camp there. But the counselor got angry and would not listen, so I took 5,000 men and set up my own camp three miles away from the hill. The Wei forces arrived en masse and surrounded the hill. I led my troops on more than a dozen attacks but could not break through. The next day, everything fell apart and countless soldiers surrendered to the enemy. I was outnumbered and could not hold my own, so I went to seek help from General Wei Yan. But I was ambushed by the enemy in the valley. I fought my way out, but by the time I got back to camp, it had been taken over by the enemy. So we went to the city of Liucheng (3,2) and ran into General Gao Xiang

on the way. We split our forces into three and went to raid the enemy camp in an attempt to reclaim Jieting. But when I saw that there were no enemy troops on the road to Jieting, I got suspicious, so I went to a high vantage point to take a look. There I saw Wei Yan and Gao Xiang trapped by the enemy, so I fought my through the enemy lines and rescued them. We then combined our forces and rushed back to Yangping Pass because we were worried it might fall. This was not a result of my not advising Ma Su. If your excellency do not believe me, you may ask other officers.”

So Zhuge Liang sternly dismissed Wang Ping and summoned Ma Su, the central doofus in this mess. Ma Su knew he was in deep trouble, so he came into the tent, he had already bound himself. He now kneeled on the ground. Zhuge Liang’s face changed colors as he addressed Ma Su.

“You have been well-versed in military texts since your youth and you are familiar with the rules of war. I told you time and again that Jieting meant everything to our campaign. You even staked the lives of your entire family to claim this important assignment. If you had listened to Wang Ping’s advice, how could such a calamity have happened? Now, we have suffered casualties and lost territory, and it’s all because of you! If I do not enforce the laws of the army, how can I command the respect of the men? You have violated military law, so do not blame me. After your death, I will make sure you family receives a monthly stipend and provisions, so do not worry about them.”

And with that, Zhuge Liang called for the executioners to take Ma Su outside. Ma Su wept and said, “Your excellency have treated me like a son, and I have treated you like a father. I know that I have committed a capital offense and cannot escape my fate. I hope your excellency will remember how the ancient sage king Shun (4) executed Gun (3) and used Yü (2). I will die without regret!”

So let’s pause and explain that last line there. It’s a reference to a well-known legend from the times of China’s earliest, mythical sage rulers. Eons ago, the people were plagued by constant flooding of the Yellow River. The king Shun (4) appointed a man named Gun (3) to oversee an effort to stop the floods, because Gun (3) was very good at containing floods within his own tribe’s territory. But Gun failed

miserably in his new role. The reason was that his approach to containing floods was to build levees along the river bank, and that was fine as long as all he had to worry about was his own tribe's territory. The levees kept the water from flooding their area, but of course the water didn't just evaporate; they just moved farther down river and drowned somebody else's territory. So when Gun was in charge of more than just his own territory, his approach failed spectacularly. After nine years of failure, the king Shun had him executed. BUT, after that, Shun still needed somebody to take care of the floods, so he turned to Gun's son, Yü (2). Yü threw himself into the job, learning from his father's mistake. Eventually he succeeded. In fact, he became such a revered figure for his efforts that Shun picked him to be the successor to the throne. So what Ma Su was saying in invoking this story was that he hopes Zhuge Liang will look after his son.

As Ma Su cried bitterly, Zhuge Liang also wept and said, "You and I are like brothers. Your son is my son. No need to concern yourself too much with that."

And then, it was back to lopping off heads. The executioners dragged Ma Su outside the camp and were just about to do their thing when the senior official Jiang (2) Wan (3) arrived from the capital. When he saw what was happening, Jiang Wan immediately shouted for the executioners to hold on while he went inside to plead with Zhuge Liang for leniency.

"When the kingdom of Chu (3) executed the general De (2) Chen (2), their rival lord rejoiced," Jiang Wang said to Zhuge Liang. "Right now, the realm is still up for grabs. It would be a shame to execute a wise adviser."

So Jiang Wan just threw another historical reference at us that needs explaining. His reference dates from the Spring and Autumn period. The kingdom of Chu relied on the general De (2) Chen (2) to lead its forces against a rival kingdom. After one defeat, he was forced his own lord to commit suicide. When the lord of their rival kingdom heard this, he was delighted because De Chen was basically the only guy

from Chu that kept him up at night, and now he was dead. So Jiang Wan was obviously comparing Ma Su to this De Chen.

But Zhuge Liang refused to budge. He said, “The great military strategist Sun Zi was able to govern the realm because he followed his own laws. Right now, the realm is divided and the battle has just begun. If we do away with the rule of law, then who are we to wage war on rebels? Ma Su deserves to die.”

Momentarily, the executioners came in and presented Ma Su’s head on a platter, and Zhuge Liang burst into uncontrollable tears, which prompted Jiang Wan to ask, “Now that Ma Su has rightfully paid for his offense, why does your excellency weep?”

“I am not weeping for Ma Su,” Zhuge Liang explained. “On his deathbed the First Emperor told me, ‘Ma Su’s words surpass his substance; he must not be given important assignments.’ And now, that has proven correct. I deeply regret that I was not able to see it. And now I am reminded of the First Emperor’s words. That is why I weep.”

Zhuce Liang wasn’t the only one weeping. All the officers and soldiers joined in on the tears. Ma Su’s head was taken to each camp and displayed before the men to show them that this is what happens when you decide you’re too smart to listen to Zhuge Liang and end up making an ass of yourself. Then, Zhuge Liang had the head sewn back onto the body and gave Ma Su a burial. He personally wrote the eulogy and took special care to make sure that Ma Su’s family continued to receive a stipend and provisions.

But Ma Su wasn’t the only one Zhuge Liang wanted to punish for the defeat. He now asked Jiang Wan to deliver a letter from him to the emperor, asking that he himself be demoted. This message said:

“I am an ordinary talent, but came to hold a position far beyond my abilities. I tried my best to inspire the army as its commander, but I failed to enforce the laws clearly and to act with prudence.

That led to the loss of Jieting, where my orders were violated, and of Ji (1) Gorge, where my warnings were ignored. The fault lies entirely with me for mis-delegating my authority. I did not choose well and made grave errors in the affairs entrusted to me. According to the Spring and Autumn Annals, the fault lies with the commander, and so it is I who should accept responsibility. I am requesting to be demoted three grades. Filled with shame, I prostrate and await your command!"

When the emperor Liu Shan (4) read the letter, he said, "Victory and defeat are common in war. Why does the prime minister speak so severely?"

Fei (4) Yi (1), the privy counselor, replied, "It is my understanding that those who administer a country must revere the law above all else. If they do not follow the law, then who will? The prime minister suffered a defeat and has rightfully decided to penalize himself."

Hearing this, Liu Shan granted Zhuge Liang's request and demoted him to General of the Right, BUT, he also made him "acting prime minister" and allowed him to retain command of the army. So basically Zhuge Liang didn't lose any authority, just a title, and maybe a little dock in pay.

Liu Shan sent Fei Yi to deliver this edict to Zhuge Liang. Now, Fei Yi didn't want to make Zhuge Liang look bad, so after Zhuge Liang accepted the imperial decree, Fei Yi said to him, "The people of Shu were delighted to hear that your excellency had conquered four counties."

That comment was well-meant, but boy did it set off Zhuge Liang.

"What are you talking about?!" he said as his face changed colors. "To have gained and then lost again is the same as not having in the first place. Your compliments on that account humiliate me."

Oh, ok. So Fei Yi tried to grasp at another straw. "The emperor was delighted to hear that your excellency had gained the officer Jiang Wei."

But Zhuge Liang just got angrier. “The army returned in defeat without having gained a single inch of territory. That is a great offense on my part. What does it matter to the kingdom of Wei to lose a mere Jiang Wei?”

Fei Yi was probably thinking, “C’mon man. I’m just trying to make this easier on you. Why are you busting my chops?”

“Your excellency currently commands a strong army of a few hundred thousand men. Is that enough to attack Wei again?” he asked Zhuge Liang, giving up on any attempt to soften the blow.

“When our army was garrisoned at Mount Qi and Ji (1) Gorge, we outnumbered the enemy, and yet instead of defeating the enemy, we were defeated by them,” Zhuge Liang replied. “The cause lay not with the size of the army, but with the commander. Now, I want to downsize the army, study my mistakes, and revise our tactics for the future. Otherwise, superior numbers would do us no good. From now on, anyone who is concerned about the fate of the country must vigorously call out my errors and hold me responsible for my shortcomings. Thus can success be ensured, rebels destroyed, and early victory attained.”

So basically, Zhuge Liang was neck-deep in self-flagellation, and Fei Yi and company said fine, we’ll spend every day telling you how stupid you are, if you would stop just twisting every nice thing we say into a self-criticism.

From that day on, Zhuge Liang stayed in Hanzhong, treating the army and the civilians with kindness, training the troops and teaching his men the art of war. He also constructed equipment for besieging cities and crossing rivers and stockpiled provisions for future use.

None of this escaped the attention of the enemy. Spies soon brought word of Zhuge Liang’s actions to the Wei capital, and the emperor Cao Rui now consulted Sima Yi about trying to conquer Shu. But Sima Yi said, “It is not yet the time to attack Shu. It is the height of summer, so the Shu forces will not



make any moves. If we venture deep into their territory and they fortify their defenses at key locations, it would be difficult to make any quick progress.”

“But what should we do if Shu invades us again?” Cao Rui asked.

“I expect that Zhuge Liang will aim for Chencang (2,1), just like Han (2) Xin (4) once did,” Sima Yi said. Now he is making a historical reference here, and I’m going to do a short supplemental episode on this to explain the story in more detail. But for now, just know that he is basically saying Zhuge Liang is going to make a misdirection play and try to sneak his army out through a key location called Chencang.

“I would like to recommend a man to go defend the road at Chencang,” Sima Yi continued. “There will be no chance of him losing that location. He stands almost 7 feet tall, has strong arms, is adept at archery, and is full of strategy. If Zhuge Liang tries to invade, this man can turn him back.”

So the guy that Sima Yi was recommending was a general named Hao (3) Zhao (1). Cao Rui accepted Sima Yi’s recommendation and appointed Hao (3) Zhao (1) as the General who Controls the West and stationed him at Chencang.

While he was busy securing his western borders, Cao Rui got a letter from Cao Xiu (1), the senior commander who was keeping watch on the Southlands. Cao Xiu reported that Zhou (1) Fang (2), the governor of the key city of Poyang (2,2) in the kingdom of Wu, had expressed a desire to surrender his territory to Wei, and that he had sent a secret letter telling them that Wu was ripe for the taking and that they should make their move soon.

Cao Rui rolled open the memorial from Cao Xiu and asked Sima Yi to read it with him. Sima Yi said, “This advice is quite logical. Now is the time to extinguish Wu. I am willing to lead an army to go assist Cao Xiu.”

But just then, the general Jia (3) Kui (2) stepped forth and said, “The words of the people of Wu cannot be trusted. This Zhou (1) Fang (2) is too smart to be surrendering. This must be a deception to lure us into a trap.”

Sima Yi replied, "That may be true, but this is too good an opportunity to pass up."

So, faced with two conflicting pieces of advice, Cao Rui decided that Sima Yi and Jia (3) Kui (2) should both go help Cao Xiu with the attack. So they set off right away. While Cao Xiu led the main army to attack the city of Wancheng (3,2), Jia (3) Kui (2) led an army to take the city of Yangcheng (2,2), and Sima Yi led his army to take Jiangling (1,2).

And just to dispose of any suspense here, yes this was indeed a trick by the Dongwu governor Zhou Fang. In fact, at this moment, the Lord of Dongwu, Sun Quan, was meeting with his officials about this very thing and discussing how to attack Cao Xiu now that he seems to have taken the bait. The senior official Gu (4) Yong (1) told Sun Quan, "A mission this important can be entrusted to no one except Lu (4) Xun (4)."

Sun Quan was like, yeah, I figured as much. Thanks a lot guys. So he summoned Lu Xun and heaped a couple more impressive titles on him. Lu Xun was also given command of the Royal Guard and given the authority to act on behalf of Sun Quan. He got the yak-tail standard and the golden mace as symbols of his authority. With all the officials assembled and watching, Sun Quan personally gave Lu Xun his horse whip.

After thanking Sun Quan, Lu Xun recommended two guys to serve as his deputy commanders. One was the general Zhu Huan (2), whom we've met before. The other was a general named Quan (2) Cong (2). So they set out with three field armies, with Lu Xun leading the army in the center, Zhu Huan on the left, and Quan (2) Cong (2) on the right.

Zhu Huan now said to Lu Xun, "Cao Xiu only came by his position because of his family connection to the Wei emperor. He is neither a smart nor a courageous general. Now that Zhou Fang has lured him deep into our territory, when you attack him, he will surely lose. Once he has been defeated, he will retreat along one of two routes, both of which are treacherous mountain paths. General Quan (2) and I

should each lead an army and lie in wait. We will use logs and boulders to block the roads, and Cao Xiu will be ours. Once we've captured him, we can march uncontested and take the city of Shochun (4,1), and then the cities of Xuchang and Luoyang will be within striking distance. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

But Lu Xun was like, yeah I don't think so. "This is not a good idea," he said to Zhu Huan. "I have my own plan."

Well, excuuuse me! Zhu Huan went away seething. Lu Xun then order Zhuge Jin (3) to defend the city of Jiangling (1,2) against Sima Yi and made various other deployments.

Meanwhile, Cao Xiu and his army were approaching the city of Wancheng (3,2), and the supposed defector Zhou Fang came to greet them. Cao Xiu said to him, "I recently received your letter, and what you said made a lot of sense. So I informed my emperor, and he has dispatched three armies for this campaign. If we can conquer the Southlands, then you will have rendered a tremendous service. Some people said that you are shrewd and worried that you were lying, but I don't think you would deceive me."

When Zhou Fang heard the part about people questioning his sincerity, he broke down in tears and pulled out one of his attendants' sword and tried to slit his own throat, but Cao Xiu immediately stopped him.

"What I have said came straight from my heart," Zhou Fang declared. "And yet you doubt me. This must be the work of Dongwu's spies. If you listen to them, then I am a dead man. May heaven attest to my loyalty!"

And as he spoke those words, Zhou Fang once again raised his sword to his throat. Cao Xiu quickly grabbed him and said, "I was just teasing you; there's no need for this!"

But Zhou Fang wasn't quite done with his theatrics. Determined to slice something off to prove his loyalty, he cut off his own hair with his sword and threw it to the ground.

"Sir, I have nothing but loyalty for you, and yet you tease me," he said to Cao Xiu. "So I have cut off the hair that my parents have left me to prove my sincerity!"

Now, you might be thinking, yeah ok, giving yourself a haircut. Boy that really proves it. But we need to understand that according to Chinese customs, every part of the body, including the hair, was considered sacred because it was seen as an inheritance from one's parents. So cutting off your hair was no small matter. Remember when Cao Cao's horse trampled some wheat, he cut off his own hair as a substitute punishment for cutting off his head. So after this little act by Zhou Fang, Cao Xiu was totally convinced and held a feast to welcome him.

After Zhou Fang took his leave, the general Jia (3) Kui (2) came to see Cao Xiu. Remember that Jia Kui had been dispatched to attack another city, so Cao Xiu wanted to know what he was doing there.

"I am guessing Dongwu's troops are all garrisoned in Wancheng (3,2)," Jia Kui said. "General, you must not advance lightly. Wait for me and we shall attack them on two sides, then the enemy will be crushed."

But being the genius he was, Cao Xiu got mad at Jia Kui for this seemingly sound advice. "Are you trying to steal my glory?!" he said.

But Jia Kui would not relent and pressed further.

"I also heard that Zhou Fang cut off his hair to swear and oath. That is a deception. Remember how Yao (1) Li (2) cut off his own arm to assassinate Qing (4) Ji (4). You must not trust him."

So this reference that Jia Kui just made dates back to the Spring and Autumn period. To make a long story short, Yao (1) Li (2) was an assassin dispatched by the king of one of the states of the time to kill a man named Qing (4) Ji (4). But Qing (4) Ji (4) was a very suspicious sort, so Yao Li decided to cut off an arm and told his target that the king had done this to him. Qing Ji bought it, and Yao Li got the opening

he needed to kill Qing Ji. There's actually a lot more to that story, and I might do a supplemental episode on it sometime. But in any case, Jia Kui's point was painfully obvious: We have this famous anecdote about a guy willing to give up an arm to carry out a mission, so how much are a few locks of hair worth?

Will citing well-known idioms bring Cao Xiu to his senses? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!