

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 126.

Last time, we left off with the end of Zhuge Liang's second unsuccessful campaign to conquer the kingdom of Wei. That was in the winter of the year 228. While Zhuge Liang regrouped at his base in Hanzhong, the Wei supreme commander Cao Zhen was forced to return to his capital to recover from an illness. So things were temporarily quiet on the Shu and Wei borders. But something big was stirring in the southeast, in the kingdom of Wu.

Word of Zhuge Liang's second expedition soon reached Wu. Hearing that Cao Zhen had once again suffered casualties, the officials of Wu all asked their lord Sun Quan to launch their own Northern campaign to conquer the Heartlands, but Sun Quan wasn't so sure. The senior official Zhang Zhao, however, told him that there was something important he needed to do before he could go to war.

"I have recently heard that that a phoenix was spotted in the mountain to the east of our capital, and that a green dragon was seen in the waters of the Great River," Zhang Zhao said. "Your lordship's virtue matches that of the ancient sage kings Yao and Shun, and your wisdom is the equal of the great kings of the Zhou Dynasty. You should ascend to the imperial throne, and then launch the campaign."

So remember that at this point, even though Wu was its own kingdom, Sun Quan was still technically not an emperor. I think the last title he had attained just the King of Wu, which was still a rung below emperor. Well, he's going to take care of that right now, as all the officials chimed in in agreement with Zhang Zhao.

So they picked out an auspicious date and set up an altar to the south of the capital Wuchang (3,1). Sun Quan ascended the altar and declared himself emperor. He dished out posthumous imperial titles to his father, mother, and older brother. His son Sun Deng (1) was named the heir apparent. Sun Quan also appointed the sons of two senior officials as assistants slash guides to his heir. These were Zhuge Ke (4), the eldest son of Zhuge Jin, and Zhang Xiu (1), the second son of Zhang Zhao.

Zhuge Ke will play a prominent role in our story later on, so keep his name in mind. He stood about 5 foot 3, so certainly not among the taller guys we've met in the novel. But he was very smart and was always ready with some quick-witted repartee, which made Sun Quan adore him. When Zhuge Ke was about 6 years old, he accompanied his father to a banquet with Sun Quan. During the feast, Sun Quan, noticing how long Zhuge Jin's face was, decided to have a little fun at his official's expense. He ordered his men to bring a donkey into the banquet hall, and then wrote on its face, in chalk, the words "Zhuge Jin". Everybody burst out laughing at this rather mean-spirited joke.

While everyone was laughing at his father, Zhuge Ke stood up, grabbed the chalk, and added another word to the donkey's face. When the people in attendance saw what he had written, they were all stunned. The poor donkey's face now said, "Zhuge Jin's donkey." Sun Quan was delighted with Zhuge Ke's wit, so he awarded him the donkey.

On another occasion, Sun Quan was feasting again with his officials and ordered Zhuge Ke to be the cupbearer who was responsible for going around and offering every guest a toast. When Zhuge Ke came to Zhang Zhao, the most senior official in Sun Quan's court, Zhang Zhao refused to drink, declaring, "This is not the proper custom for nourishing one's old age."

Sun Quan immediately seized upon this as an opportunity to test Zhuge Ke, asking him if he could find a way to make Zhang Zhao drink. Zhuge Ke accepted the challenge. He turned to Zhang Zhao and said, "Sir, long ago, the great adviser Jiang Ziya (3,2) was 90 years old and still he carried the signal banner and steadied the battle axe. And he never once called himself 'old.' Yet sir, you are always in the rear on the field of battle and in the front on the days of feasting. How can you claim that you are not nourishing your old age?"

Well, Zhang Zhao had no response to that, so he had no choice but to drink. Seriously, I think the novel delights in making an ass out of Zhang Zhao, whether it's his cowardly advocacy for surrendering to Cao Cao, his baseless questioning of a fellow official's loyalty, or his myriad second-rate schemes. But

still, he had served the house of Sun faithfully for decades, and had earned a place that ranked even higher than the highest ministers. That's why Sun Quan also made his son Zhang Xiu (1) an assistant to the crown prince.

While he was at it, Sun Quan also appointed the senior official Gu (4) Yong (1) as his prime minister, Lu Xun as his senior commander and charged them with helping the crown prince defend the capital Wuchang (3,1). This done, Sun Quan himself returned to the city of Jianye (4,4), where he assembled his court to discuss the coming campaign against Wei.

But now, Zhang Zhao spoke up against launching an invasion.

"Your highness has just ascended to the imperial throne and therefore should not go to war so soon," Zhang Zhao said. "The thing to do now is to develop your civil rule and lay down the weapons of war. Build schools to settle the people's minds. Renew the alliance with Shu and agree to sharing the empire with them. Play the long game."

Sun Quan consented to this plan, so he dispatched an envoy to the Riverlands to see the Shu emperor Liu Shan (4). The envoy informed Liu Shan that, hey our lord is now an emperor, too, and we would like to continue our alliance with you. Liu Shan then consulted his court about the matter. Now, you might think that this was no big deal. After all, we've had three distinct states for quite a while now, and Shu and Wu had renewed their alliance for years, so what did it matter what Sun Quan was calling himself? But, remember that, as far as the court of Shu was concerned, there is no Three Kingdoms period, and there never has been. We're still living in the reign of the Han Dynasty. Yeah sure there's a giant renegade state to the north and a, well, whatever you want to call the state of Wu to the east, but technically, the glorious Han empire was still here, and the House of Han now rules from the Shu capital of Chengdu. So when Sun Quan declares himself emperor, that kind of raises some thorny issues.

Many of Liu Shan's officials were of the opinion that they should sever relations with Wu since Sun Quan was now officially a usurper for daring to declare himself emperor. The senior official Jiang (2) Wan (3), however, came up with the smartest idea of them all.

"Let's send someone to consult the prime minister," he said.

So Liu Shan sent an envoy to Hanzhong to ask Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang replied, "We should send someone to deliver congratulatory gifts to Wu, and then ask their commander Lu Xun to lead an invasion of Wei. Wei will no doubt send Sima Yi to repel them. While Sima Yi is occupied in the South, I will march out from Qi Mountain again, and Chang'an will be within our grasp."

Following Zhuge Liang's instructions, Liu Shan sent the official Chen (2) Zhen (4) to Wu with gifts and a congratulatory letter. Sun Quan was delighted and feasted with Chen Zhen before sending him back. He then summoned Lu Xun and told him that Shu wanted to form a coalition and attack Wei together.

"Zhuge Liang suggested this because he is wary of Sima Yi," Lu Xun said. "Since we are allies, we have no choice but to agree. But we should just act like we are getting ready to launch a campaign with Shu. But we should wait. When Zhuge Liang has occupied Wei's attention, I will use that opportunity to take the Heartlands."

And so Lu Xun sent out word for the armies of Jing Province to begin daily drills and await word on when they will set out on their campaign.

Meanwhile, the Shu envoy Chen Zhen (4) returned to Hanzhong to tell Zhuge Liang that the joint campaign was a go. But Zhuge Liang still had one more concern. The last time he headed North, he was stymied at the passage at Chencang by the Wei general Hao (3) Zhao (1). So this time, before heading out, he first sent scouts to see what's been going on at Chencang. Word soon came back that Hao Zhao was currently laid up in bed with a serious illness.

“Success is ours!” Zhuge Liang exclaimed. He immediately summoned the generals Wei Yan and Jiang Wei and told them, “Take 5,000 men and march nonstop to Chencang. When you see a fire, throw everything you have at the fortress.”

Wei Yan and Jiang Wei weren’t so sure about this order, given their army’s past difficulties with trying to take Chencang. So they asked Zhuge Liang when they should head out. Zhuge Liang told them, “Get everything ready within three days. There’s no need to come take your leave of me. Just go when you are ready.”

Once those two guys left, Zhuge Liang summoned the generals Guan Xing and Zhang Bao and whispered something in their ears, and the two of them set out on their secret mission. Yeah, Zhuge Liang got his secretive mojo back again.

Meanwhile, along the border, the Wei general Guo Huai received word that Hao Zhao was sick, which was no small matter considering the importance of Chencang. So Guo Huai told his comrade Zhang He, “Hao Zhao is ill. You must go take his place at once. I will inform the court and figure out a plan.” So Zhang He headed out immediately with 3,000 men.

Inside the city of Chencang, the general Hao Zhao was on his last legs. One night, as he lay in bed groaning, his men suddenly rushed in to report that Shu forces had appeared outside the fortress. He hurriedly ordered his troops to go defend the city wall. But momentarily, all the gates to the fortress had been set on fire, and chaos reigned inside the fortress. This was too much for the ailing Hao Zhao, and he died from shock. With their commander dead, the Wei troops fell into disarray. As our camera fades to black, the last thing we see is the Shu forces storming into the fortress.

Much later, all was quiet at the fortress as the Shu army led by Wei Yan and Jiang Wei approached. They looked up from the foot of the wall. They did not see a single banner, nor did they hear anyone

banging the gongs and drums that announced the time of day. Alarmed and spooked, the two of them did not dare to launch a siege. Suddenly, an explosive sounded from atop the wall, and in the blink of an eye, the walls were lined with banners.

“You’re late,” shouted a man wearing a headscarf and a crane-pattern Daoist robe and wielding a feather fan. Yeah, guess who.

Wei Yan and Jiang Wei hurriedly dismounted and knelt on the ground.

“Your excellency’s schemes are truly divine!” they said.

Zhuge Liang now welcomed them in and explained, “When I heard that Hao Zhao was seriously ill, I ordered you to come here within three days’ time to attack the fortress. That was a decoy. I then ordered Guan Xing and Zhang Bao to slip out of Hanzhong on the pretext of calling up troops. I concealed myself within the ranks of their army, and we rushed here on the double, giving the enemy no time to deploy their forces. My spies were already in the city, and they started a fire and caused lots of ruckus to throw the Wei forces into disarray. Without their commander, soldiers naturally fall into chaos. That made taking the fortress as easy as turning over my hand. As the art of war says, ‘Appear where they least expect you; attack where they’re least prepared.’ That is exactly what I did.”

Oh ok. Wei Yan and Jiang Wei must’ve been thinking, yeah, thanks for letting us in on the scheme. Nonetheless, they bowed again, impressed by Zhuge Liang’s scheme.

Seeing that his one-time nemesis Hao Zhao was dead, Zhuge Liang allowed his family to escort his coffin back to Wei territory, out of admiration for the man’s loyalty. He then turned to Wei Yan and Jiang Wei and told them, “Don’t bother taking off your armor. Lead your troops to go attack San (4) Pass. The troops defending the pass will flee at the sight of you. If we delay, enemy reinforcements will arrive at that pass, making it hard to take.”

So Wei Yan and Jiang Wei set out immediately for San (4) Pass, and sure enough, the Wei troops there fled as soon as they arrived. Wei Yan and Jiang Wei were just about to take a breather when they

saw a giant dust cloud in the distance. The Wei reinforcements were approaching, so the Shu army had gotten there just in the nick of time, and both officers were once again impressed with Zhuge Liang's foresight.

From the command tower on the pass, Wei Yan and Jiang Wei saw that the approaching enemy forces were led by the general Zhang He, who had been on his way to replace Hao Zhao. So they deployed their troops to fortify the pass. Seeing his way blocked by the enemy, Zhang He ordered his troops to fall back. Wei Yan now gave chase and routed Zhang He's army, slaughtering a great many soldiers.

Wei Yan and Jiang Wei now sent word of their success to Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang then marched his troops through Chencang and out of the Xie (2) Gorge, taking the city of Jian (4) Wei (1) along the way. His troops continued to march, and he also got reinforcements from the capital, led by the general Chen (2) Shi (4).

Having marched out of Qi Mountain again, Zhuge Liang now set up camp, assembled his officers, and told them, "My previous two excursions from Qi Mountain were not successful, and now we are here again. I expect the Wei forces will face us at the same locations again. They will expect us to go after the cities of Yongcheng (1,2) and Meicheng (2,2), so they will no doubt have armies waiting for us there. However, the cities of Yinping (1,2) and Wudu (3,1) offer access to Hanzhong. If we can take them, we can split the Wei forces. Who dares to take them?"

The generals Jiang Wei and Wang Ping both volunteered, so Zhuge Liang gave them each 10,000 men and sent Jiang Wei to take Wudu (3,1) and Wang Ping to take Yinping (1,2).

Meanwhile, the Wei general Zhang He scrambled back to the city of Chang'an and told his comrades Guo Huai and Sun Li, "Chencang is lost, Hao Zhao is dead, and San (4) Pass now belongs to the Shu. Zhuge Liang has once again emerged from Qi Mountain and is advancing on two separate routes."

Alarmed, Guo Huai said, "If that's the case, he must be going after the cities of Yongcheng (1,2) and Mei (2,2)!"

So Guo Huai left Zhang He to defend Chang'an and sent Sun Li to go defend Yongcheng, while Guo Huai himself rushed to Meicheng. He also sent an urgent dispatch to the Wei capital Luoyang.

When the Wei emperor Cao Rui received this urgent intel, he was shocked. But this bad news was accompanied by another urgent report from the southeast, saying, "Sun Quan of Dongwu has declared himself emperor and renewed his alliance with Shu. He has ordered Lu Xun to drill their forces in their capital Wuchang (3,1) to await deployment. An invasion is imminent."

Faced with crises on both fronts, Cao Rui was in a panic. And his supreme commander Cao Zhen was still recovering from his illness, making the situation even more dire ... well, at least, in theory. With Cao Zhen ailing, Cao Rui had to turn to Sima Yi to figure out what to do.

Sima Yi told him, "In my foolish opinion, Dongwu will not mobilize its troops."

"How do you know that?" Cao Rui asked.

"Zhuge Liang has long wanted to avenge Liu Bei's defeat at the hands of Dongwu. It's not that he doesn't want to gobble up Dongwu, but he is afraid that we would take the opportunity to attack him. That's why he has temporarily allied with Dongwu. Lu Xun knows this as well, so he is just pretending to be getting his troops ready for a joint campaign. In reality, he's going to sit and watch what happens. There is no need for your highness to be wary of Dongwu; just focus on Shu."

"Sir, you are truly insightful!" Cao Rui praised. So to deal with the invading Shu army, he appointed Sima Yi as the supreme commander and gave him control of all the forces in the region of Longxi (3,1).



Now, that meant Sima Yi was taking over for Cao Zhen along the Shu and Wei border. And that required taking the seal of command away from Cao Zhen and giving it to Sima Yi, which could prove to be a sticky situation since it won't look good for Cao Zhen. Recognizing this, Sima Yi told the emperor that he would personally go get the seal from Cao Zhen.

After leaving the palace, Sima Yi headed to Cao Zhen's residence and sought an audience. After exchanging pleasantries and inquiring about Cao Zhen's health, Sima Yi said, "Wu and Shu have joined forces and are encroaching on our territory. Zhuge Liang has marched out from Qi Mountain again. Are you aware of this?"

"My family must have kept this from me on account of my illness," Cao Zhen said. "Since the kingdom is facing such a crisis, why has his highness not appointed you as commander to repel the Shu forces?"

"I am untalented and ignorant, not up to the task," Sima Yi replied.

But Cao Zhen knew better. He immediately told his attendants to go fetch his seal of command for Sima Yi, but Sima Yi pretended to decline.

"Commander, don't worry," he told Cao Zhen. "I am willing to lend any assistance I can, but I do not dare to accept this seal."

Leaping to his feet, Cao Zhen said, "If you do not accept this responsibility, then the state will be in danger! I shall go see his majesty in spite of my illness and recommend you!"

At this point, Sima Yi finally let the truth slip. "His highness has already given me that order, but it's just that I do not dare to accept."

Delighted, Cao Zhen said, "Now, you can accept this charge and repel the Shu invaders."

Since Cao Zhen repeatedly insisted on him accepting the post, Sima Yi relented and took the seal. He then took his leave of the emperor and set off for Chang'an to plan his war against Zhuge Liang.

So, we're now in the fourth month of the year 229. In the span of the past year and a half, Zhuge Liang had launched three invasions of the North. On this, his third attempt, he garrisoned his troops at Qi Mountain and set up three camps to await the enemy. Sima Yi, meanwhile, arrived in Chang'an and appointed the general Zhang He as his vanguard and the officer Dai (4) Ling (2) as Zhang He's lieutenant. He then led 100,000 men to Qi Mountain, setting up camp on the south bank of the Wei (4) River.

Once he was done setting up camp, he met with the generals Guo Huai and Sun Li and asked them if they had faced off against the enemy yet. They told him no.

"The Shu army has traveled a great distance to get here, and it is to their advantage to seek a quick battle," Sima Yi said. "But they have not done so. There must be deception afoot. Is there any news from around the region?"

"Our scouts have already reported that all the cities are on high alert and there has been no surprises," Guo Huai said. "But we have not yet heard from the cities of Wudu (3,1) and Yinping (1,2)."

Yeah, maybe you should have led with that last part. Sima Yi immediately told them, "I will go face Zhuge Liang. You two take the backroads and go save those two cities right away. Attack the enemy from behind, and they will fall into disarray."

So Guo Huai and Sun Li led 5,000 men and headed toward Wudu and Yinping. Along the way, they started chatting about their new commander.

"How does Commander Sima compare to Zhuge Liang?" Guo Huai asked Sun Li as they rode.

"Zhuge Liang is well above Commander Sima," Sun Li answered.

"That maybe so," Guo Huai countered, "But our commander showed with this plan that he possesses uncommon intelligence. If the Shu forces are attacking those two cities, then they will naturally fall into chaos if we attack from behind."

Yeah, that sounded nice, but just then, word came from the scouts that, hey, don't bother. Yinping had already fallen to the forces led by the Shu general Wang Ping, and Wudu had been sacked by Jiang Wei. And oh by the way, the Shu forces are right up the road.

"They have already sacked the city, so why are their troops still stationed outside?" Sun Li wondered. "This must be a trap. We should retreat at once."

Guo Huai agreed, but just as he ordered a retreat, an explosive sounded, and from behind the hill a battalion appeared, bearing a giant banner that read, "Zhuge Liang, Prime Minister of the Han." In the middle sat Zhuge Liang on his four-wheel chariot, flanked by the officers Guan Xing and Zhang Bao. The sight of Zhuge Liang stunned Guo Huai and Sun Li.

"Stop where you are," Zhuge Liang said with a big laugh. "How can Sima Yi's scheme deceive me? He has been sending people to give battle every day, all the while sending you two to attack our rear. But Wudu and Yinping already belong to me. Why haven't you surrendered yet? Do you really want to fight me?"

While Guo Huai and Sun Li were still trying to recover from this surprise, loud cries of war rose up behind them. The Shu generals Wang Ping and Jiang Wei charged in from the rear, while Guan Xing and Zhang Bao attacked from the front. Sandwiched, the Wei forces were crushed. Guo Huai and Sun Li were forced to abandon their horses and climb up the hillside on foot to escape. Seeing them on the hill, the Shu general Zhang Bao spurred on his horse and gave chase. But suddenly, his horse slipped and fell into a rushing stream, taking Zhang Bao with it. His soldiers quickly rescued him, but Zhang Bao had broken his head, so Zhuge Liang sent him back to the Shu capital Chengdu to recuperate.

As for Guo Huai and Sun Li, they hoofed it back to camp and told Sima Yi, "Wudu and Yinping have already fallen. Zhuge Liang ambushed us on the road. We were routed and only escaped by abandoning our horses and fleeing on foot."

“This was not your fault,” Sima Yi told them. “Zhuge Liang outsmarted me. Lead your troops to go defend the cities of Yongcheng (1,2) and Meicheng (2,2). Do not go out to fight. I have a plan to defeat the enemy.”

Once Guo Huai and Sun Li left, Sima Yi summoned his vanguard generals Zhang He and Dai (4) Ling (2) and instructed them, “Now that Zhuge Liang has taken the cities of Wudu and Yinping, he will no doubt be there trying to put the civilians’ minds at ease. That means he is not in his camp. You will each lead 10,000 crack troops and set off tonight to sweep around to the rear of the Shu camp and attack. Meanwhile, I will lead my forces and line up in battle formation on the front end. Once the Shu army is in chaos, I will attack. With our combined might, we will take the Shu camp. Once we control this mountainous terrain, defeating the enemy will be no problem at all.”

So the two vanguard officers set out, with Dai (4) Ling (2) on the left, and Zhang He on the right, traveling deep into enemy territory along backroads. Around midnight, they converged on the main thoroughfare, joined forces, and swept toward the rear of the Shu army. But they had not gone 10 miles before the front of the column stopped. Zhang He and Dai Ling rode up to the front to see what’s going on, and there, they saw hundreds of carts, loaded with hay, blocking their path.

“The enemy is prepared; we must retreat at once!” Zhang He said.

No sooner had he given the order to fall back did the hillside light up with torches and shook with the sound of drums and horns. Hidden enemy troops appeared from everywhere, surrounding the two Wei officers.

From the top of the hill, Zhuge Liang shouted, “Dai Ling, Zhang He, listened to my words. Sima Yi figured that I would be at Wudu and Yinping to reassure the civilians, so he sent you to raid my camp. You have fallen into my trap. You two are no-name pawns, so I won’t kill you. Surrender now!”

To see if the two trapped Wei officers will surrender, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!