

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 136.

Last time, we had a rare year of peace after Zhuge Liang died. None of the three kingdoms were at war. But while there was peace on the frontiers, the Wei emperor Cao Rui was fighting a war on the homefront. He engaged in lavish palace construction projects that drained his kingdom of men and wealth and executed officials who dared to speak up against it. Also, he was stirring up trouble in his harem. He was enamored with a concubine named Lady Guo (1), causing him to neglect his empress, Empress Mao (2). When Empress Mao made a somewhat snide remark about him touring the gardens with Lady Guo the day before, Cao Rui became incensed, because he had specifically ordered the palace attendants that no one was to mention a word of it to the empress, and yet it looked like somebody had snitched.

So, in a fit of anger, he ordered all his attendants be put to death. This shocked Empress Mao, and she quickly returned to her palace. But by the time she got back, a decree from Cao Rui had arrived, ordering her to commit suicide, which she dutifully did. Once that was done, Cao Rui named Lady Guo his new empress. Nobody at court dared to say a word about this, since they had all seen what happens to those who speak up against their lord. And remember that Cao Rui's father, the previous emperor Cao Pi, had done the exact same thing to Cao Rui's mother, first neglecting her for another woman, and then ordering her death when he got annoyed with her. Like father like son, I guess.

So Cao Rui was not-so-subtly running down the road to ruins, ticking every box in the cliché despot's checklist to self-destruction. But before he could run himself into the ground, an external threat arose that tried to do it for him. One day, an urgent message arrived from You (1) Province, informing him that Gongsun Yuan (1) had declared himself a king and was busy building an imperial palace and invading other territories in the north. So yeah, this was rebellion.

So who was this Gongsun Yuan (1) that's causing trouble in the north? His father, Gongsun Kang (1), was a warlord who reigned over the region of Liaodong (2,1), which lay in the northeastern corner of the empire. In the year 207, Cao Cao defeated the sons of Yuan Shao, and two of them fled to seek refuge with Gongsun Kang (1). Gongsun Kang took one look at the situation and decided that there would be more trouble than it's worth to keep them around, so he ambushed them at a banquet and killed them. When he sent their heads to Cao Cao, Cao Cao was delighted and gave him a marquiship and allowed him to stay in control in the region of Liaodong. All of this was covered back in episode 42 if you need a refresher.

So Gongsun Kang had two sons, and the younger one was our latest rebel, Gongsun Yuan (1). When Gongsun Kang died, both of his sons were still young, so their uncle assumed Gongsun Kang's position and was later promoted by Cao Rui's father Cao Pi to General of Chariots and Cavalry. By the year 228, Gongsun Yuan (1) had grown to adulthood. He was well-versed in literary and martial skills, but he also had a stubborn, aggressive personality. He put all those traits to use in wresting control of the region from his uncle. When that happened, the new Wei emperor, Cao Rui, simply shrugged and gave Gongsun Yuan (1) a generalship and appointed him as governor of Liaodong, since Cao Rui honestly couldn't care less which member of the Gongsun clan was in charge of the region, as long as they stayed in line.

That was good for awhile, but then the kingdom of Wu sent a couple envoys with lots of gifts to go see Gongsun Yuan, offering to name him a king. The idea here was to establish him as an independent power center, thus creating another threat for the kingdom of Wei. But Gongsun Yuan didn't really feel like becoming an enemy of Wei, so he had the two envoys executed and sent their heads to Cao Rui. As reward, Cao Rui named him grand marshal and named him a duke.

And yet, that was not enough, as far as Gongsun Yuan was concerned. I don't know what he was angling for, but whatever it was, Cao Rui did not offer it, so Gongsun Yuan became disgruntled and started talking with his staff about declaring himself king.

When he floated this idea to his staff, however, one officer spoke up and said, "The Heartlands have appointed you as a Duke. That is no small rank. If you rebel, you would be in the wrong. Besides, Sima Yi is adept at war. Not even Zhuge Liang could best him, much less your lordship."

I'm sorry, but you chose your words ... poorly. Gongsun Yuan flew into a rage and wanted to have the officer executed. But another staffer spoke up and said, "His words are quite right. As Confucius said, 'When a kingdom is nearing its demise, demons will appear. Recently our state has seen many strange things. There was a dog wearing a Daoist headdress and clad in red, walking on a roof. Also, a man in a village to the south of the city was cooking rice when inexplicably, a young child was found steamed to death inside their rice pot. What's more, in the north market of another city, a hole suddenly appeared in the ground. From the hole came a piece of flesh. It was several spans around. It had facial features but no limbs. It could not be harmed by weapons, and no one knows what it was. A diviner said, 'A shape not completed; a mouth that is mute. This means the ruling house will fall.' With those three bad omens, your lordship should avoid evil and reckless actions."

First of all, eeesh. I don't know about you guys, but I'm totally creeped out by those omens. No matter how many times I read this part of the novel, it still sends a slight shiver down my spine. And second, oh yeah, Gongsun Yuan was having none of this. He promptly had both naysayers beheaded in public, and then mobilized 150,000 men to march on the Heartlands.

When word of his rebellion reached the Wei capital, Cao Rui immediately summoned Sima Yi to discuss how to respond.

“Your servant has 40,000 troops under his command,” Sima Yi said. “That is more than enough to defeat the rebels.”

“But you will have a long journey and few troops,” Cao Rui said. “It might be difficult to reclaim the territory.”

“It’s not about the size of the army, but how you use it,” Sima Yi countered. “With your highness’s blessing, I will capture Gongsun Yuan and present him to you.”

“How do you think Gongsun Yuan will react?”

“His best move is to abandon his base at the city of Xiangping (1,2) and flee. The next best plan is to defend the region of Liaodong against my army. But if he stays inside the city of Xiangping (1,2) and try to hold out, that would be the worst plan, and he would be mine for sure.”

“How long would your campaign require?” Cao Rui asked.

“It’s a journey of more than 1,300 miles,” Sima Yi answered. “It will take 100 days to get there. 100 days to lay siege. 100 days for the return trip, plus 60 days of rest. About a year should do it.”

“But what if the other kingdoms encroach while you’re gone?”

“I have already laid down plans for defense. There is no need for your highness to be concerned.”

Satisfied that everything was taken care of, Cao Rui ordered Sima Yi to go put down Gongsun Yuan. Sima Yi appointed an officer named Hu (2) Zun (1) to be his vanguard and sent him on ahead to set up camp in the renegade region of Liaodong. Word of this soon reached Gongsun Yuan. He sent his top commander and vanguard general to lead 80,000 men to stage a defense at the city of Liaosui (2,4). They dug a big moat around the city and set up a thick barrier of brambles and sharp stakes.

When Hu (2) Zun (1) sent word of this to Sima Yi, Sima Yi smiled and said, “That rebel refuses to fight me because he is trying to exhaust my army. I expect that most of the rebel forces are here, and that

their base is vulnerable. Let's give up this position and make straight for Xiangping (1,2). The rebel forces will no doubt redeploy to try to stop us. We will attack them en route and victory will be ours."

Meanwhile, the two officers leading Gongsun Yuan's army at Liaosui (2,4) were planning to do exactly what Sima Yi suspected. They figured that the Wei army, being so far from home, would have trouble resupplying. So they were going to just stay on the defensive and wait until the enemy runs out of food and retreats. And then they would attack. I mean, that was pretty much Sima Yi's playbook against Zhuge Liang, and look, he held out for so long that Zhuge Liang died in his own camp, so you know it's a good strategy.

But just then, word came that the Wei army had ditched its camp and was headed south. The two officers immediately recognized that the enemy was going to attack the city of Xiangping (1,2) and immediately moved their forces out to go relieve the siege. As they approached the banks of the Liao (2) River, they were greeted with the sound of an explosive, followed by drums and roars as two battalions of Wei soldiers stormed out, led by the generals Xiahou Ba (4) and Xiahou Wei (1). The Liaodong (2,1) forces turned and fled. They kept running until they ran into their lord, Gongsun Yuan, who was leading his army toward Xiangping as well. So now, they combined their forces and turned to take on the Wei army. This turned out to be a bad idea, though. Gongsun Yuan's top commander was quickly cut down by Xiahou Ba, and the troops fell into disarray. Gongsun Yuan and his defeated army scampered into the city of Xiangping and shut the gates behind them. The Wei army surrounded the city. So Sima Yi had Gongsun Yuan right where he wanted. And now Sima Yi just had to wait him out.

But the wait was proving to be the hardest part. It was the middle of fall, and the rain came down nonstop for a month. A couple feet of standing water covered the plains outside Xiangping. The water was deep enough for the granary ships to sail from the nearby river to the foot of the city. The Wei soldiers were camped right in the middle of this wet muck, and it was not pleasant at all.

One of Sima Yi's lieutenant commanders went to see him and said, "It's raining nonstop. Our camps are mired in mud, and the men cannot rest. Please relocate our camps to the hills.

But that suggestion angered Sima Yi. "We're on the brink of capturing Gongsun Yuan. How can we move our camp? If anyone dares to mention this again, they will be executed."

So that lieutenant commander slinked away chastened. But moments later, the other lieutenant commander came in and said, "The men are suffering from the flood. Please move the camp to higher ground."

"I have already given the order. How dare you go against it?!" Sima Yi raged. And he immediately had this unfortunate soul dragged outside and beheaded, and hanged his head on the camp gates to put everybody on notice. And that took care of any more talk of moving the camp.

But then, Sima Yi did relocate one part of his army. He ordered the camp on the south side of the city to back off about six or seven miles. That provided enough breathing room for the people inside the city to come out to forage and set their cattle to graze.

This move confounded one of his officers, who asked him, "Back when you were attacking the traitor Meng (4) Da (2), you split your army into eight units and rushed to his location in just eight days to capture him. Now, you have 40,000 troops and have come a long way to get here. But instead of laying siege to the city, you're settling in for a long stay in the muck, and now you're letting the enemy come out to forage and graze. What is the meaning behind this?"

Sima Yi smiled and said, "Do you not know the art of war? Back when I was attacking Meng Da, the enemy had lots of provisions but few troops, while I had few provisions but lots of soldiers. I had no choice but to fight quickly, catch him off guards, and attack him when he's not expecting it. But now, the enemy has superior numbers, but they starve while we are well-fed. So there's no need to lay siege.

We'll wait until they flee, and then attack. That's why I left them an opening -- not just to forage or graze, but to flee."

Sima Yi then sent men back to the capital Luoyang to ask the emperor Cao Rui for more provisions. The officials at court all advised Cao Rui that he should recall the army on account of the unending rain, but Cao Rui refused.

"Sima Yi is well-versed in war. He can adapt to changing circumstances and is full of good ideas. He is about to capture Gongsun Yuan any day now. There's no need for you all to be concerned."

So Cao Rui ignored his courtiers and sent more provisions to the front.

A few more days passed, and the rain stopped and the skies cleared. One night, Sima Yi was outside studying the heavens when he saw a big meteor the size of a ladle crashing down to the southeast of Xiangping (1,2). The sight of this alarmed all the soldiers, but Sima Yi was delighted. He told his officers, "Five days from now, we will slay Gongsun Yuan where that meteor crashed. Tomorrow, throw everything you've got at the city."

So the next morning, the siege began on four sides and kept up morning, day, and night. Dirt mounds were built, tunnels were dug, siege towers were erected, and the city was showered with arrows.

Inside the city, Gongsun Yuan not only had to deal with the siege, but also with starvation. By now, his troops were reduced to slaughtering cattle for food. Everybody was disgruntled and in no mood for a fight to the end. Instead, a lot of folks were entertaining the idea of killing Gongsun Yuan and offering his head and the city to Sima Yi. When he found out about this, Gongsun Yuan was understandably worried. So he now started entertaining thoughts of surrender.

He sent two of his staffers to the Wei camp to discuss terms. They were lowered from the city walls via a basket on a rope, and they went to tell Sima Yi, "Grand Commandant, please fall back a few miles, and our lord will come to surrender."

But Sima Yi flew into a rage. "Why did he not come himself?! This is outrageous!"

So Sima Yi ordered the guards to take the two envoys outside and cut off their heads. He then told the envoys' attendants to bring those heads back to Gongsun Yuan. Uh, ok, so now what?

Gongsun Yuan wasn't quite ready yet to give up on giving up. So he sent another staffer to Sima Yi's camp to discuss terms. Sima Yi assembled his officers and summoned this guy. Now, this envoy was quite mindful of the fate of his predecessors. He entered on his knees and said, "Grand commandant, we pray that we may appease your majestic anger. My lord will send his heir apparent to you as hostage, and then my lord will have himself bound and come to offer his surrender."

But Sima Yi was not moved.

"There are five inevitables in war," he said. "If you can fight, then fight. If you cannot fight, then defend. If you cannot defend, then flee. If you cannot flee, then surrender. If you cannot surrender, then die! What is all this with sending his son as a hostage?"

Well, at least this time, Sima Yi let the envoy keep his head. The envoy returned and told Gongsun Yuan that Sima Yi said no dice. So Gongsun Yuan decided to make a run for it with his son. That night, around 9 o'clock, the two of them secretly rounded up 1,000 men, flung open the south gate, and fled toward the southeast. They met no resistance, or at least, for the first few miles. Pretty soon, though, they were greeted with the sound of an explosive, the pounding of drums, and the blaring of horns. A detachment of troops blocked their way, and it was led by Sima Yi and his two sons, shouting, "Stop rebels!"

Gongsun Yuan quickly turned and tried to flee, but more Wei forces appeared from behind and surrounded him and his troops. Trapped, Gongsun Yuan and his son dismounted and surrendered.

Sima Yi, seated in his saddle, told his officers, “A couple nights ago, I saw a meteor crash here, and now, we have fulfilled the omen.”

“Grand commandant, your plans are truly divine!” his men replied.

Sima Yi didn’t mess around. He immediately had Gongsun Yuan and his son executed, and the two were beheaded facing each other. Sima Yi now went to take the city. By the time he got there, his vanguard had already entered the city, and the residents lined the streets on their knees while incense to welcome the army, which is what you do when you don’t want to get slaughtered by the soldiers who just sacked your town..

Once inside the city, Sima Yi had Gongsun Yuan’s entire clan executed, along with the officials who joined him in his uprising. That produced a headcount of about 70, and then Sima Yi posted announcements telling the people of the city that all was well and there was nothing to worry about, except for, you know, all those heads hanging around. Sima Yi also built graves for the two officials that Gongsun Yuan had executed for advising against an uprising. He then opened up the city’s storehouses and distributed its wealth to his troops before heading back to Luoyang. This was in the year 238, four years after Zhuge Liang’s death. So yes, we’re moving along briskly.

Another year passed, and the reaper came calling for the Wei emperor Cao Rui. One night, while he was in his palace, a cold wind suddenly swept through his chambers, blowing out all the candles. In the darkness, he suddenly saw a few dozen people approaching him and demanding their lives back. When they got closer, he saw that it was the ghosts of Empress Mao (2), whom he had ordered to commit suicide at the beginning of this episode, and of the attendants he had executed in a fit of anger when one of them told her that he had been hanging out with Lady Guo (1).

After this harrowing encounter, Cao Rui fell ill, and he did not get any better. Pretty soon, he was on his deathbed, making arrangements for succession. He put a couple veteran court officials in charge of

the central council to oversee everything. He then asked one of his half brothers to serve as regent to his heir apparent. But this half brother declined, saying that he didn't feel comfortable taking on such an important responsibility. So Cao Rui turned to the two court officials who were now running things and asked them who else would be up to the task.

Now, both of these officials had long received the favor of the former supreme commander Cao Zhen. And Cao Zhen, if you remember, was in charge of the Wei army. But he was so inept that he was repeatedly defeated by Zhuge Liang and shown up by Sima Yi, before dying after one last round of mockery by Zhuge Liang. But while he was alive he had treated these two officials well, so they now told the emperor that Cao Zhen's son, Cao Shuang (3), was the only man for the job of regent. This Cao Shuang was a familiar face around the palace growing up, and Cao Rui appreciated his caution and diligence, so now he consented to the recommendation.

Next, the two officials now also wanted to make sure Cao Shuang didn't have any competition at court, so they told Cao Rui that he should send his half brother, the one who had turned down the job, back to his fiefdom, in essence exiling him from the capital. Cao Rui also consented to this, so the two official relayed his decree to his half brother that he was to leave at once for his fiefdom and was not allowed to return to the capital unless summoned. This half brother went away in tears, but dude, you had your chance and you turned it down. So blame yourself. Meanwhile, Cao Zhen's son, Cao Shuang, assumed his post as regent and took over control of the court.

Cao Rui's condition continued to deteriorate after that, so now, he sent an urgent dispatch to summon Sima Yi to court. Sima Yi immediately went to Xuchang (3,1), where Cao Rui was laid up in bed. When he entered Cao Rui's chambers, Cao Rui told him, "I was afraid I would not get to see you. But now, I can die in peace."

Prostrating with his head touching the floor, Sima Yi replied, "When I found out that your highness was not well, I wish I could grow wings so I could fly here. It is my great fortune to get to see your majestic countenance today."

Time was running short, so Cao Rui summoned his heir apparent, Cao Fang (1), along with the regent Cao Shuang and the other two senior court officials to his bedside. There, Cao Rui took Sima Yi's hand and said, "When Liu Bei was on his deathbed in the city of Baidi (2,4), he entrusted his young son Liu Shan (4) to the care of Zhuge Liang. Because of that, Zhuge Liang devoted the rest of his life faithfully serving his young liege. If a small kingdom in the corner of the realm can behave thus, it goes without saying that our large kingdom must also live up to that example. My son Cao Fang is only 8 years old, too young to govern. But fortunately he will have you, grand commandant, as well as my kinsmen and veteran officials. Please do you can to help him; do not let me down!"

Cao Rui then turned to his son and said, "Grand Commandant Sima and I are like one. You must treat him with respect."

He then ordered Sima Yi to take Cao Fang's hand and approach the bed. But instead of taking Sima Yi's hand, Cao Fang wrapped his arms around Sima Yi's neck in an embrace and refused to let go. Seeing this, Cao Rui told Sima Yi, "Please remember the affection my son is showing you today!"

With those words, Cao Rui's eyes filled with tears, while Sima Yi prostrated and wept. Moments later, Cao Rui began to lose consciousness and could no longer speak. With his last gasp, he pointed at his son, and then he was dead. It was the first month of the year 239. He had reigned for 13 years and was just 36 years old. Remember that his father, Cao Pi, also died young, at the age of 39. Like father, like son.

So now, Sima Yi and Cao Shuang elevated Cao Rui's son Cao Fang to the throne. This Cao Fang was actually a foster son whose origins were shrouded in mystery. According to historical records, there's

some suggestion that he was the son of one of Cao Rui's cousins, but no one really knows. In any case, with an 8-year-old on the throne, Cao Shuang and Sima Yi now stepped into positions of great importance as they oversaw affairs at court. Cao Shuang was much younger than Sima Yi. Remember that his father was of Sima Yi's generation. Cao Shuang showed great deference to Sima Yi, informing him before all major decisions.

But one day, one of Cao Shuang's confidants, a man named He (2) Yan (4), told him, hey, maybe you shouldn't be sharing your authority with Sima Yi so willingly.

"My lord," He Yan (4) said, "you must not entrust your great power to others, or there will be trouble."

"But our previous emperor entrusted both Commandant Sima and me with his heir. How can I bear to go against his dying wish?" Cao Shuang said.

He Yan now reminded him, "Back when your father and Sima Yi were fighting against the Riverlands, Sima Yi humiliated him time and again and caused his death. How can you not be aware of that?"

Cao Shuang was like, hey, that's right! This guy did make an ass out of dad. So he now began scheming with other officials. The idea they came up with was to promote Sima Yi. Wait, what? Well, you'll see.

So Cao Shuang went to see the young emperor Cao Fang and said, "Sima Yi has rendered tremendous service and deserves to be promoted to imperial guardian."

Cao Fang consented, so Sima Yi got promoted. But hey guess what? The imperial guardian doesn't command any armed forces. So now, all the military power rested with Cao Shuang, and he put three of his younger brothers in key positions, and each was put in charge of 3,000 imperial guards and given permission to enter the imperial quarters at will. He also put a five of his confidants, including He Yan, in key positions and consulted them all the time. As a result, the ranks of Cao Shuang's followers swelled by the day.

And what was Sima Yi's reaction to all this? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!