

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

So this is a huge one. In this episode, we bid farewell to the novel's most prominent character, Zhuge Liang, by examining the similarities and differences between the real-life man and his fictional counterpart.

So in the novel, when we are first introduced to Zhuge Liang, he was in his late 20s and had already taken up residence in the countryside of Jing Province, leading the life of a recluse. But what about his life before that? We're not really told much about Zhuge Liang before his meeting with Liu Bei, so let's delve into that pre-history right now.

According to the historical records, Zhuge Liang was a native of Xu (2) Province. He was born in the year 181, about three years before the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, which marked the beginning of the novel. His father was a low-level county official in Yan (3) Province. So Zhuge Liang's roots were in the territories that would eventually become part of the kingdom of Wei (4).

Zhugeliang's father died in the year 187, when Zhuge Liang was just 6 years old. Now, remember that Zhuge Liang was the middle son. He had two brothers and two sisters, and they all needed a caretaker now that their father was dead.

That caretaker turned out to be their uncle, who was in the service of Liu Biao (3), the imperial protector of Jing Province. This uncle moved to Xu Province to watch over Zhuge Liang and his siblings. A few years later, Cao Cao launched his invasion of Xu Province in search of vengeance after an officer under the imperial protector of that province had killed Cao Cao's father. To flee the ravages of war, Zhuge Liang's uncle packed up all his nieces and nephews and moved them South. All, that is, except for Zhuge Liang's elder brother Zhuge Jin. Zhuge Jin was 7 years older than Zhuge Liang, and he was in his 20s at this point, so he struck out on his own, moving to the Southlands, where he became a key adviser for the ruling Sun family.

Zhuge Liang's uncle was then recommended for the governorship of a city by the warlord Yuan Shu, and he served in that post for a short time before being replaced. After that, he returned to the service of Liu Biao, so he brought Zhuge Liang and his younger siblings to the Jing Province city of Xiangyang (1,2). Not long after that, in the year 197, this uncle died, so Zhuge Liang, now at the ripe old age of 16, became the de facto head of his household.

He moved the family to the nearby countryside, in the county of Nanyang (2,2), where he farmed by day, studied by night, and became good friends with some of the well-known scholars in the area. One of those acquaintances was Sima Hui (1), aka Master Water Mirror, the guy who in the novel was the first to hint to Liu Bei about the existence of a great talent in the area. Another acquaintance was Pang (2) Degong (2,1), the uncle of Young Phoenix, aka Pang Tong. A third literary friend was Huang (2) Chenyan (2,4), who would actually become Zhuge Liang's father in law.

There's actually a bit of a story about how Zhuge Liang came to take Huang (2) Chenyan's (2,4) daughter as wife. So when Zhuge Liang decided that it was time to marry, he started looking at various potential matches. Huang Chenyan told him, "Hey, I have a daughter. She is REALLY ugly. Her hair is yellow and her skin is dark, but her talent is a match for yours." When Zhuge Liang heard this, he immediately agreed to the match. This actually became the source of a local saying, "When choosing a wife, don't be like Zhuge Liang, or you'll end up with a wife as ugly as Huang Chenyan's daughter." I can't help but feel that there's a missed lesson here about looking beyond appearances and judging prospective mates on substance, but oh well.

So Zhuge Liang spent the next decade of his life living the life of a reclusive farmer-scholar. Then, around the year 207, he had a visitor, a down-on-his-luck general named Liu Bei who had been crashing on Liu Biao's couch for the past six years and hiding from Cao Cao. Now, in the novel, we had a dramatic scene about how Liu Bei learned of Zhuge Liang's existence. His military strategist at the time, Xu (2) Shu (4), had been forced to leave him because Cao Cao had imprisoned Xu Shu's mother. But as he was

leaving, Xu Shu suddenly turned his horse around and told Liu Bei, “Oh yeah, I meant to tell you, there’s a guy around here that you really should meet.”

But in real life, this recommendation was much less dramatic. Xu Shu didn’t leave Liu Bei until much later. Cao Cao did not take Xu Shu’s mother hostage until Cao Cao had conquered Jing Province and Liu Bei and company were all on the run. So when Xu Shu recommended Zhuge Liang to Liu Bei, he was still very much gainfully employed in Liu Bei’s service. Liu Bei was intrigued by his recommendation and asked Xu Shu to go invite Zhuge Liang to come for an interview, but Xu Shu told him, “You can’t ask him to come to you; you have to go to him.”

And go to Zhuge Liang he did. Liu Bei, in real life, made his famous three visits to Zhuge Liang’s thatched cottage in those idyllic bamboo groves that were overrun with cranes and monkeys. Just as the novel described, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang for a plan to restore the empire, and Zhuge Liang laid out the vision of three kingdoms: Let Cao Cao have the North since he was way too powerful to overcome at that point, and make nice with Sun Quan and the Southlands to the East. He told Liu Bei that Jing Province and Yi (4) Province, aka the Riverlands, were his for the taking and that he should build his base in those territories and bide his time for the right opportunity to conquer the North.

This was in the year 208, and that grand vision laid out by Zhuge Liang in his thatched hut would help set the course of events for decades to come. Now, if you took the novel at its word, then you would be left with the impression that Zhuge Liang single-handedly brought this vision to bear and changed the course of history on his amazing talent. But, as you may have already realized from previous supplemental episodes about other key figures from the novel, this portrayal of Zhuge Liang greatly exaggerates his record in military affairs. So let’s take a look at what Zhuge Liang actually contributed to the formation of the three kingdoms. To do that, I’m going to take a look at the various significant events that occurred after Liu Bei met Zhuge Liang, and talk about Zhuge Liang’s real role in each.

First up is the Battle of Red Cliff, where the coalition of Liu Bei and the Southlands defeated Cao Cao. As you should all know by now, this was THE pivotal battle that set us on the course to have three kingdoms. Before this battle, Cao Cao had appeared invincible and seemed like he would just steamroll the South the same way he had run roughshod over the North. That all changed at Red Cliff.

In the novel, Zhuge Liang was instrumental in creating the alliance between Liu Bei and Sun Quan. And then he proceeded to show up all of the Southland officers and used his brilliant tactics and supernatural powers to defeat Cao Cao. We had the episode where he used boats filled with strawmen to “borrow” 100,000 arrows from Cao Cao. And then of course there was the part where he changed the direction of the wind for three days so that the Southlands commander Zhou Yu could deploy a fire attack.

But as we have previously mentioned in the supplemental episodes on the Battle at Red Cliff and on Zhou Yu, the real Zhuge Liang did not seem to have played a significant role in the actual battle planning itself. Instead, his main contribution appears to have been serving as the initial envoy from Liu Bei to the Southlands and convincing Sun Quan that he should ally with Liu Bei rather than submit to Cao Cao. Now this was no small feat, mind you. Just as the novel depicted, many people in Sun Quan’s court were advocating surrender rather than resistance.

In the novel, we had a scene where Zhuge Liang used reverse psychology and told Sun Quan that he should submit to Cao Cao to save himself. When Sun Quan asked, “Well, then why doesn’t your master surrender to Cao Cao, too?” And Zhuge Liang essentially said, “Oh my master is way too honorable for that.” The trick worked, and it spurred Sun Quan into choosing to fight rather than submit. And this actually happened, according to the historical text *The Records of the Three Kingdoms*.

But missing from the historical records is any mention of Zhuge Liang’s exploits in planning the military strategies for the Battle of Red Cliff, as well as anything about all the times in the novel when

Zhou Yu tried to kill Zhuge Liang. In real life, Zhou Yu was the hero at Red Cliff, with an assist from a pestilence that crippled Cao Cao's army. It seems that when it came to the battle itself, the most you could say about the real Zhuge Liang was that "he was also there," sort of. We're told he returned to Liu Bei's camp with the Southlands army that Sun Quan sent to fight Cao Cao, but nothing more beyond that.

After the Battle of Red Cliff, Liu Bei took advantage of Cao Cao's retreat to move in and claim four counties in Jing Province. In the novel, Zhuge Liang played a central role in capturing these places, including devising one strategy after another to foil and frustrate Zhou Yu, to the point where Zhou Yu died. But the historical records didn't really mention Zhuge Liang's role in this expansion. It just said Liu Bei gradually claimed the four counties. What it did say about Zhuge Liang is that after Liu Bei had captured those counties, he named Zhuge Liang a commander and military strategist and put him in charge of the administration of three counties. In that role, Zhuge Liang was in charge of collecting taxes and securing provisions for the army.

The next major event on the road to three kingdoms is Liu Bei's conquest of the Riverlands. Now, remember that this actually began with Liu Bei being invited by the ruler of the Riverlands to go into that region with his army to help fend off a potential invasion by a rival warlord. Liu Bei was all too happy to do that, of course, since it gave him a foothold in the region. When he departed for the Riverlands, he left Zhuge Liang in charge of Jing Province, along with his generals and confidants Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

That was in the year 211. In December of the following year, Liu Bei officially turned on his host and began his bid to conquer the Riverlands. This conquest took a good year and a half, and for much of it, Zhuge Liang was nowhere near the action. He was still back in Jing Province. During this time, Liu Bei's

main advisers on the frontlines were Pang Tong, aka Young Phoenix, and Fa (3) Zheng (4), a Riverlands official who had defected to him.

During this war, Liu Bei was stalled outside a key city for more than a year. During that time, Pang Tong was killed by an arrow while directing a siege on the city. Nonetheless, Liu Bei eventually managed to sack the city in May of the year 214 and proceed to surround the Riverlands capital of Chengdu. It was at this point that Zhuge Liang arrived with reinforcements from Jing Province. At the same time, the general Ma Chao also joined Liu Bei, and together, they were able to force the enemy to surrender and hand over control of the Riverlands to Liu Bei.

So technically, Zhuge Liang WAS the military strategist who helped Liu Bei complete his conquest of the Riverlands. But when you look at it, it was really Pang Tong and Fa Zheng who did the bulk of the work in getting Liu Bei close, and Zhuge Liang was kind of like the guy who came off the bench and pounded the football into the end zone from the 5-yard line. But he did contribute, and for his role, Liu Bei appointed him as General of the Left and military adviser general.

After Liu Bei conquered the Riverlands, the next significant event was the battle between him and Cao Cao for control of the neighboring region of Hanzhong. Now, this battle lasted 2 years, running from the year 217 to 219. Cao Cao controlled the region, and Liu Bei wanted it.

In the novel, Zhuge Liang was right there with Liu Bei in the command tent, drawing up plans for every move. His brilliant schemes frustrated Cao Cao so much that Cao Cao eventually said the heck with this and packed up and went home, conceding the territory to Liu Bei.

In reality, however, Zhuge Liang spent the entire two years of the battle holding down the fort in the capital Chengdu. Now, this actually made a lot of sense when you think about it. While Liu Bei was away leading the army on campaign, he needed somebody he could trust, and somebody with the skills to keep things running smoothly, to hold down the fort back at home. And that was Zhuge Liang's job. That

and supplying Liu Bei's army. It is said in the Records of the Three Kingdoms that whenever Liu Bei went on campaign, he was in want of neither provisions nor troops, which is a testament to the abilities of the guy in charge of providing both of those things.

For the Battle of Hanzhong, Liu Bei launched several attacks on Cao Cao's defenses, but all of them ended badly. In July of 218, Liu Bei sent urgent dispatches to Chengdu asking for reinforcements, and Zhuge Liang, recognizing the importance of Hanzhong to the safety of the Riverlands, promptly delivered. The fresh troops allowed Liu Bei to hold his ground and engage in a yearlong stalemate against Cao Cao's troops. Eventually, things turned in Liu Bei's favor and he notched several big victories before the two sides settled into another stalemate. In the end, Cao Cao thought the cost of maintaining the stalemate was too high and decided to fall back out of Hanzhong, giving it to Liu Bei. With this key region in hand, Liu Bei now declared himself the king of Hanzhong.

So, at this point, in the summer of 219, the first half of the vision that Zhuge Liang had laid out for Liu Bei back in his thatched hut had been fulfilled. Liu Bei controlled Jing and Yi (4) Provinces, and there were now three stable power centers in the empire: Cao Cao in the North, Sun Quan in the Southeast, and Liu Bei in the Southwest. The next part of Zhuge Liang's plan was to wait for an opportunity, like say, internal unrest in Cao Cao's territory, and launch a two-pronged invasion of the North. One prong would strike from Jing Province, while the other would attack from the Riverlands.

Alas, it was not meant to be. No sooner had Liu Bei declared himself king did the events that would lead to his downfall begin. In the year 219, Liu Bei conquered Hanzhong in the summer and made himself king in the fall. That winter, his general Guan Yu, who had been left in charge of Jing Province when Zhuge Liang went to the Riverlands, took it upon himself to launch an attack on Cao Cao's holdings in Jing Province. We all know how that turned out. Guan Yu had some initial success, but his deployments left Jing Province vulnerable, and the frenemy state of Dongwu took advantage and

conquered the province. Guan Yu found himself attacked by Sun Quan and Cao Cao on two fronts and ended up losing his head.

From where Zhuge Liang was sitting, the real loss here wasn't so much Guan Yu, but Jing Province. It was always part of his plan that when the time came for a Northern invasion, it would be a two-pronged attack. Part of the reason for this is that it was very difficult to launch a speedy invasion of the North from the Riverlands. As we have mentioned before, the treacherous terrain of the Riverlands provided a natural defense against invaders, but also made it exceedingly hard to launch an invasion of your own. And in the novel, we saw this factor at play time and again when Zhuge Liang undertook his Northern campaigns. Jing Province, by contrast, was on flat terrain and had good roads and convenient access to the Yangzi (2,3) River and its tributaries, making it very easy to move troops and provisions. So losing Jing Province was a huge blow to Zhuge Liang's long-term vision.

Compounding the problem, after Guan Yu was killed, Liu Bei decided to go out seeking revenge and ended up wrecking a significant portion of his army, drastically weakening his kingdom's military might. What's more, Liu Bei himself took the defeat so hard that he fell ill and died in the year 223. On his deathbed, Liu Bei famously entrusted his heir, the 16-year-old Liu Shan (4), to Zhuge Liang's care. The novel and the historical records converge here in that Liu Bei apparently really did tell Zhuge Liang that if the young prince proved unworthy, then Zhuge Liang should feel free to make himself the lord of the Riverlands. As I speculated during the course of our narrative, this could have just been a ploy to ensure Zhuge Liang's loyalty. If that was the case, then it sure worked, because Zhuge Liang served Liu Shan faithfully and tirelessly.

So, up to this point, the real Zhuge Liang's biography may have you asking, "Did this guy actually win any battles with his strategy?" Because it seems like he was more or less just playing a supporting role in Liu Bei's military campaigns. And that was pretty much true, from what I can tell. But with Liu Bei's



death, we see Zhuge Liang really vault into a leading role, not only in the administration of the kingdom, but also in its military affairs. Liu Bei pretty much put him in charge of everything, and Zhuge Liang did not shy away from the responsibilities.

One of his biggest accomplishment in his new role as regent for the young Liu Shan was just making sure the kingdom stayed in one piece after Liu Bei died. He did so in part by rekindling the alliance with Dongwu and restoring some stability on the borders.

Two years after Liu Bei died, Zhuge Liang launched a Southern campaign to pacify some local tribes that had been causing trouble off and on. This was the famous campaign on which, according to the novel, he captured and released the barbarian king Meng (4) Huo (4) seven times before earning his loyalty and submission. This story is backed up by sources cited in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, so let's say Zhuge Liang really did this. But as I mentioned when we were covering this campaign in the podcast, the real Meng Huo perhaps did not exert as much control over the region as the novel made it sound. In any case, this was clearly a mismatch, as Zhuge Liang pretty much had his way with Meng Huo.

So that Southern campaign took about a year, and Zhuge Liang accomplished his objective, which was to squelch a potential problem on the homefront so that he could turn his full attention North. In the spring of the year 227, he began the first in a series of Northern campaigns, which lasted until the fall of 234, covering the final years of his life. The novel says he waged six Northern expeditions in this span. According to the historical texts, it was actually five expeditions. The difference comes down to whether you count one of the engagements as an expedition or just as a defensive campaign to repel a Wei encroachment. In any case, just like in the novel, Zhuge Liang fell ill on his final campaign and died at the age of 53. Unlike the novel, there was no mention of any last-ditch efforts to pray to heaven for an extension.

So that's Zhuge Liang's real life and career in a nutshell. Of course, to truly appreciate Zhuge Liang, we have to go well beyond the nuts and bolts of his career.

Now, more than any other character, Zhuge Liang gets a huge publicity boost from the novel, which elevates him to near god-hood. But even in his own time, the real Zhuge Liang WAS a revered figure among friends and foes alike. For one thing, he was by all accounts a polymath, excelling in a number of areas. More than anything, he was widely respected for his abilities as an administrator. His administration was seen one that abided by its own laws and improved the lot of the common people, you know, the kind of things that a functional government is supposed to do.

Zhuce Liang was praised for his fairness. It was said that if you were loyal and diligent, even if you didn't get along with him personally, he would reward you for your contribution, whereas he would punish even his confidants if they slipped up on the job. If you committed an offense and owned up to it, he would cut you some slack even if it was a serious offense. On the other hand, if you try to deny or talk your way out of it, he would smack you down even if it were a minor offense.

This unflinching adherence to the law applied to himself, too. Remember that after one of his Northern campaigns ended badly, Zhuge Liang demoted himself from his position as prime minister. And because he played no favors in applying the law, people both feared and respected him, and even though he was strict, no one begrudged his strictness. In fact, the guy who wrote the Records of the Three Kingdoms had high praise for Zhuge Liang even though the author's own father was once punished by Zhuge Liang.

Zhuce Liang was also famously frugal. He once mentioned in a memorial to the emperor that all he had were some modest plot of land and 800 mulberry trees, that the only clothes he had were the ones bestowed upon him by the court, and that even his own son had to be self-reliant. In his instructions for his own burial, he specifically said they shouldn't build a fancy grave for him. Just dig a hole that's just big enough to fit his coffin, and put him in his usual attire. He also forbade any sacrificial items at his

funeral. This was truly remarkable given that this was a time and culture where gifting was expected from government officials.

When it came to taking care of the commoners, Zhuge Liang did a number of things that improved the economy of the Riverlands. The region was actually doing pretty well when Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang and company took over, and to their credit, they kept it going. Now, in the supplemental episode on Cao Cao, we discussed how Cao Cao put his soldiers to work on formerly abandoned farmland as a way to shore up the food supply for the army, which had the side effect of improving the common people's lot as well. But in the Riverlands, that practice was never implemented on a large scale, owing in part to the different circumstances of the two regions. Instead of taking over land and putting it under military control, Zhuge Liang actually returned more land and farmsteads to civilians. He also focused heavily on improving irrigation in the region. Under his administration, the Riverlands' agriculture and economy continued to thrive, which enabled Zhuge Liang to support an army and repeated forays into the North despite possessing only a relatively small region.

Beyond his political and administrative acumen, Zhuge Liang was also praised as a scholar. Unlike, say, Cao Cao, he didn't leave us poems or anything like that, but his two memorials to the emperor requesting permission to embark on Northern campaigns are widely seen as masterful pieces of writing. He has also been noted by later scholars for his calligraphy, painting skills, and musical abilities. Like I said, the man was a true polymath.

And of course, he was also an inventor. As we mentioned, he really did design something called wooden oxens and gliding horses to help transport grain for his army. He also improved the crossbow, to the point where a particular type of crossbow bore his name. And of course, he invented the steamed bun known as mantou. All those were mentioned in the novel. One thing he invented that wasn't mentioned was a type of hot air balloon for sending signals which also bore his name. As the story went, Zhuge Liang was once trapped inside a city by Sima Yi. After reading the direction of the wind, Zhuge

Liang created this paper lantern thing that could float in the air as a way to deliver a message calling for backup, and that helped him to eventually evade danger. I'm surprised that this was not in the novel, because it sounds like something that would seem miraculous even before you add any fictional embellishments.

But perhaps more than anything else, Zhuge Liang is revered for two particular attributes: the loyalty he demonstrated to Liu Bei and his son Liu Shan (4), and the tireless dedication he showed in his service. When Liu Bei died and entrusted his young son Liu Shan to Zhuge Liang, Zhuge Liang was placed in a position where so many other men of his time would not have hesitated to take power for themselves. In fact, the novel sets up a not-so-subtle contrast between Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi. Both were entrusted by their respective lords with the heir apparents, but while Zhuge Liang remained steadfast to his vow of loyalty, Sima Yi usurped power when the opportunity presented itself.

Even putting aside the pro-Shu propaganda of the novel, the historical records do tell us that Zhuge Liang was indeed very loyal to Liu Shan. In fact, at one point, Li Yan (2), a senior official in the Riverlands, tried to convince Zhuge Liang to accept the Nine Dignities, the nine items that marked an official's special status. This was a very rare honor, and often times, it was simply a prelude to the official supplanting the lord. Zhuge Liang, on the other hand, turned it down. Instead, he toiled tirelessly to realize Liu Bei's unfulfilled goal of reuniting the empire. In the second memorial that he wrote to request permission for a Northern campaign, he penned a phrase that would come to define him to posterity. He wrote that he would be "loyal and devoted to the last, and not give up until death" in his service to Liu Shan.

So, given everything that we know about the real Zhuge Liang, what do I think about the man? I don't think there's any doubt that he had an extraordinary mind, and his abilities as a statesman do not

seem to be in doubt. And when it comes to military matters, his strength in overseeing the logistics of supplying and organizing an army is documented.

I do think the novel goes way overboard in portraying his prowess as a military strategist. I'm not saying he was a chum. He was in charge of the military for the smallest of the three kingdoms, and he had to go through some treacherous mountains every time he tried to go anywhere outside his borders, and yet he was usually on the offensive and kept the kingdom of Wei on its heels.

But let's think about this: For all the descriptions of his military brilliance in the novel, when you get down to it, what did he really accomplish? We've already established that the real Zhuge Liang likely did not play a key role in the military aspects of the pivotal Battle of Red Cliff. We've also established that for most of Liu Bei's conquest of the Riverlands, Zhuge Liang wasn't there. He showed up as Liu Bei was closing in on the capital and helped finish the job. Now, he did pacify the ethnic minorities in the southern reaches of the Shu kingdom, but from everything we know, that was an obvious mismatch.

And then you look at Zhuge Liang's Northern campaigns. The novel regales us with tales of his clever maneuvering, making it sound like he was simply toying with his opponents, luring them into one trap after another. And yet, for all those masterful strategies, when you look at the map, he was basically just banging his head against the mountainous terrain along the borders and never really made much progress into Wei territory. He never even came close to sniffing the key western stronghold of Chang'an, much less the Wei capital Luoyang, which laid farther to the east.

Now, the novel comes up with a litany of reasons for this, and in most cases, the fault did not lie with Zhuge Liang. It was always somebody else's fault, whether it be the officer Ma Su (4) or the renegade general Meng Da thinking they knew better than Zhuge Liang, or the muddle-headed emperor Liu Shan believing rumors that Zhuge Liang was planning to usurp power, or the incompetence of the people in charge of supplying the army, or, on his last campaign, the intervention by heaven itself to foil a brilliant trap that would have burned Sima Yi alive.

But, let's not be too hard on the guy, especially given that he served the underdog. Zhuge Liang had the foresight to lay out, from his thatched hut in the woods, a vision of the empire being split into three kingdoms. It was the blueprint that Liu Bei followed to establish his enterprise. In the wake of Liu Bei's loss to Dongwu and his subsequent death, Zhuge Liang managed to pick up the pieces, stabilize the kingdom, and build its strength back up to the point where, despite being the smallest of the three kingdoms, it was often the aggressor. His repeated forays into the North, while ultimately unsuccessful, did force the kingdom of Wei to expend massive amount of manpower and resources to defend itself. AND he invented the steamed bun. How much more can we ask of one man in a single lifetime?

Alright, that wraps it up for Zhuge Liang. I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!