

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 144.

Last time, Jiang Wei had launched yet another Northern campaign, trying to catch his enemies off guard while they were dealing with an internal rebellion by Zhuge Dan. This time, Jiang Wei was focusing his attention on the town of Changcheng (2,2), a key grain store for the Wei forces. He put the town under siege and it looked like the town was about to fall. But just then, a Wei relief force showed up. Sigh, I guess we'll have to take care of these guys first. So Jiang Wei turned his army around to face the oncoming foe.

From the opposing lines, a young general rode out with spear in hand. He looked to be about 20-some years old, with a face so fair that he looked as if he were wearing powder, and his lips were daubs of red. This young man shouted across the field, "Do you recognize General Deng?!"

Jiang Wei thought to himself, "That must be Deng Ai." So he rode forth to meet his foe, and the two traded blows for 40 bouts without either gaining an edge. Seeing that the young warrior showed no signs of faltering, Jiang Wei figured he needed to pull some shenanigans to win this fight. So he turned and fled down a mountain path on the left. The young general gave chase, and as he approached, Jiang Wei pulled out his bow and fired an arrow at the man. But his foe had sharp eyes and quickly dodged the arrow. When Jiang Wei turned around, the young man was already upon him and thrusting his spear at him. Jiang Wei dodged the thrust, letting the spear go under his arm, and then he wrapped his arm around the spear. His foe now ditched the spear and rode back toward his own lines.

Jiang Wei lamented this missed opportunity to slay this Deng Ai that he had heard so much about, and now it was his turn to give chase. But when he approached the enemy's lines, he was suddenly greeted by another, older general who wielded a saber.

"Jiang Wei you scoundrel!" this general shouted. "Stop chasing my son! Come meet Deng Ai!"

Oh ok. So only now did Jiang Wei realize that the young man who had fought him to a standstill was Deng Ai's son. He was secretly astonished at the young man's skills. He wanted to go take on Deng Ai,

but was worried that his horse was too tired, so he pointed at Deng Ai and said, "Today was my introduction to you and your son. Let's call it a day and settle this tomorrow."

For his part, Deng Ai recognized that the field of battle was not to his advantage, so he agreed, saying, "In that case, let's both bring our armies back to camp. A real man would not ambush his foe." So the two armies both fell back. Deng Ai set up camp by the Wei (4) River, while Jiang Wei set up camp across two mountains.

After studying the Shu army's deployment, Deng Ai wrote to Sima Wang (4), the commander inside the town of Changcheng, and told him, "We must not fight, only defend. When our reinforcements arrive, the enemy will be out of provisions and under attack on three sides. Then, victory will be guaranteed. I am sending my eldest son Deng Zhong (1) to help you defend the town." And while that message was on its way to Sima Wang, Deng Ai also sent an urgent dispatch to Sima Zhao, requesting aid.

Soon, Jiang Wei sent a message to Deng Ai challenging him to a battle the next day. Deng Ai said, yeah sure, let's do it. So the next day, Jiang Wei got his army up bright and early, prepared breakfast, and then went out at first light to set up their battle formation and wait for Deng Ai to arrive. They waited, and waited, and waited, but Deng Ai never showed. What's more, his camp was all quiet as if there was no one home. Jiang Wei spent a whole day waiting before returning to camp at dusk.

The next day, Jiang Wei sent Deng Ai another message, saying, yo, what's up with that? You SAID you would show up yesterday. Deng Ai treated the messenger to wine and food and told him, "I was under the weather and missed our appointment. Tomorrow, we shall fight."

So the next day, Jiang Wei marched his army out and lined up again. And once again, Deng Ai left him hanging all day. It just kept going like this, and after the fifth or sixth time, the Shu general Fu (4) Qian (1) said to Jiang Wei, "This must be a trick; we need to be on guard."

“They must be waiting for reinforcements from the Heartlands,” Jiang Wei said. “Then they can attack us on three sides. I will send a message to Sun Chen (1), the prime minister of Dongwu, and ask him to help us.”

But just then, scouts reported that Sima Zhao had sacked the city of Shouchun, killed the rebel general Zhuge Dan (4), and that the Dongwu army had surrendered. What’s more Sima Zhao had returned to the Wei capital and was now planning to bring reinforcements to lift the siege on Changcheng.

“This invasion has turned into another empty dream!” a stunned Jiang Wei said. “We should turn back.”

So Jiang Wei sent his equipment and supplies on ahead, followed by the infantry, and had the cavalry bring up the rear on the retreat. When spies reported this development to Deng Ai, Deng Ai smiled and said, “Jiang Wei heard that our regent-marshal was coming, so he pulled out first. There’s no need to give chase; if we do, we will fall into a trap.”

So he just sent some scouts to go check on the enemy, and sure enough, they reported back that at various bottlenecks along the way, Jiang Wei had stockpiled firewood in preparation for using fire to ambush any pursuers. All of Deng Ai’s officers were impressed by his foresight. When word of this latest victory reached Sima Zhao, he was delighted and rewarded Deng Ai once again.

With the western border quiet for now, let’s jump over to the Southlands to see the fallout from Dongwu’s failed attempt to aid the rebellion within the Wei borders. The prime minister Sun Chen (1) was enraged about so many of his officers defecting to Sima Zhao, so he had all their families executed. This retaliation was too much for his emperor Sun Liang, but Sun Liang was pretty powerless to do anything about his prime minister.

So this Sun Liang was actually a pretty bright boy. As an example of his intelligence, the novel gives us this story: One day, while he was eating a fresh plum in the garden, Sun Liang asked an eunuch to go fetch some honey. Moments later, the honey arrived, but hey wait a minute, what are all those little pieces floating around inside? Wait, is that what I think it is? Is that ... rat droppings? Eww!

Naturally, Sun Liang was displeased, and he summoned the steward who kept the honey to chew him out. But the steward kowtowed and said, "Your servant kept the honey tightly sealed. How could rat droppings have gotten in?"

Sun Liang now asked him, "Has the eunuch ever asked you for some honey for himself?"

"He did, a few days ago, but your servant did not dare to give him any."

Sun Liang now pointed at his eunuch and said, "You must have held a grudge against the steward for not giving you honey, so you put rat droppings in the honey to frame him."

When the eunuch denied this, Sun Liang said, "This is easy enough to figure out. If the rat droppings have been in the honey for a long time, then they must be soaked through. If they were placed in the honey just now, then the inside should be dry."

So he had his men cut open the rat droppings, and whatdayaknow? The inside was dry. So the eunuch got his just deserts.

However, rat-droppings-related wisdom notwithstanding, Sun Liang was still just 16 years old, and he was nothing more than a puppet being pushed around by Sun Chen. Sun Chen held firm control over the military and placed his brothers in charge of all the key posts.

One day, Sun Liang was just sitting around with nothing to do. He was being attended to by Quan (2) Ji (4), a member of the Inner Bureau and Sun Liang's brother-in-law. Sun Liang said to Quan Ji with tears in his eyes, "Sun Chen has concentrated power in his hands and kills people at will. He bullies me too much! If we don't get rid of him now, he will be a problem eventually."

“My lord,” Quan Ji said, “if there’s something I can do for you, I will never refuse.”

Sun Liang told Quan Ji, “You can go mobilize the imperial guard and have the general Liu (2) Cheng (2) lock down all the gates of the capital. Then I will go kill Sun Chen. But you must not let your mother hear about this plan. She is Sun Chen’s sister. If this leaks out, it would do me in.”

Quan Ji said, “I beg your majesty to give me a handwritten edict so that I can show it to the troops when the time comes. That way Sun Chen’s henchmen will not dare to take matters into their own hands.”

So Sun Liang wrote a secret edict and gave it to Quan Ji. When Quan Ji went home that night, he indeed did not tell his mother about this. He did, however, tell his father, Quan Shang (4). Quan Shang (4) then went and told his wife that they were going to kill Sun Chen in three days. But umm, wait a minute here. Quan Shang was Quan Ji’s father, so that would make Quan Shang’s wife Quan Ji’s mother, and wasn’t Quan Ji not supposed to tell ... oh boy. Yeah, this is NOT how you run a conspiracy.

So when Quan Shang’s wife, aka Quan Ji’s mother and Sun Chen’s sister, heard this plan, she said, “Yes, Sun Chen deserves to die.” But as soon as she had a moment to herself, she sent a secret letter to Sun Chen, spilling the beans. Sun Chen was understandably outraged. That very night, he called up his four brothers, mobilized their troops, and surrounded the palace. At the same time, he arrested Quan Ji, the general Liu Cheng (2), and their entire families.

At first light the next day, Sun Liang suddenly heard earth-shattering drums and gongs coming from just outside the palace gates. One of his attendants rushed in and told him that Sun Chen’s troops had surrounded the palace. An angry Sun Liang pointed at his empress and said, “Your father and brother have ruined my plan!”

Then, Sun Liang pulled out his sword and wanted to go outside and fight it out. But all his attendants grabbed him by his robe while weeping and refused to let him go. So while Sun Liang was stuck in the palace, Sun Chen first had all his accomplices executed, and then gathered the court officials and told

them, “Our lord is depraved and sick. He is incompetent and immoral, not fit to rule. We must depose him. Anyone who dares to oppose this will be treated as a conspirator!”

Well, since you put it that way, sure, everyone at court was on board, except for one official. This guy stepped forward and cursed Sun Chen, saying, “Our lord is wise. How dare you speak such nonsense?! I would rather die than follow the command of a traitor!”

Ok, death wish granted. Sun Chen pulled out his sword and personally cut this guy down. Anyone else want to object? Anyone? I didn’t think so. Sun Chen now went into the palace and cursed Sun Liang.

“You immoral, ignorant ruler. You should be executed to appease the realm, but for the sake of our former lord, we will reduce you to a duke. I will select a man of virtue to replace you!”

And so Sun Chen confiscated Sun Liang’s imperial seal and sent him on his way, and Sun Liang left in tears.

For a replacement, Sun Chen settled on Sun Quan’s sixth son, Sun Xiu (1). This Sun Xiu had a dream that night. He dreamed that he was riding a dragon toward heaven, but suddenly, he turned around and did not see the dragon’s tail. This startled him and he woke up.

The next morning, envoys arrived and asked him to accompany them to the capital. So he went, and one of Sun Chen’s brothers greeted him with the imperial litter. Sun Xiu did not dare to ride in it. Instead, he took a small carriage into the capital, where he was greeted by kneeling officials. Sun Xiu hurriedly dismounted and bowed in return. Sun Chen helped him up, escorted him into the main hall, and announced that he was the new emperor. As was appropriate in these situations, Sun Xiu declined several times before accepting. He then appointed Sun Chen as his prime minister and imperial protector of Jing Province, and the rest of the officials got rewards and promotions as well.

So Sun Chen was now more powerful than ever. He and his four brothers received marquiships, and Sun Xiu showed them great favor publicly. But secretly, Sun Xiu was wary of them and trying to protect himself from them. Sun Chen, in the meantime, grew ever more arrogant.

So we're now in the year 258. That winter, Sun Chen brought beef and wine to the palace and presented them to Sun Xiu to celebrate the emperor's health. But Sun Xiu declined the gifts. That did not sit well with Sun Chen. He took his beef and wine over to the home of Zhang Bu (4), the General of the Left, and shared it with his host. As Sun Chen started feeling a buzz, he said to Zhang Bu, "When I deposed Sun Liang, everyone told me I should take the throne myself. Yet, I thought our present lord was a worthy man, so I put him on the throne instead. And now, he refuses my gift and treats me like a nobody. Well, I'll show him one of these days!"

As Zhang Bu listened, he just nodded. The next day, though, Zhang Bu went to the palace and relayed Sun Chen's words to Sun Xiu, who was now on edge day and night. After a few days, Sun Chen sent one of his men to the city of Wuchang (3,1) with 15,000 troops and gave them control over the armory.

Two officers loyal to Sun Xiu soon brought word of these movements to the emperor, telling him, "Sun Chen is moving troops out of the capital and emptying the armory. A coup must be coming."

Alarmed, Sun Xiu summoned Zhang Bu to ask for ideas. Zhang Bu said, "The old general Ding Feng is an excellent strategist. He is capable of dealing with such an important matter."

So Sun Xiu summoned Ding Feng and brought him up to speed. Ding Feng said, "My lord, have no worries. I have an idea that can rid the kingdom of this evil. Tomorrow is the start of the year-end festival. You can hold a feast for all the officials and summon Sun Chen to attend. I will arrange everything else."

That night, a violent gale whipped up, blowing sand and pebbles into the air and uprooting old trees. When morning came, the wind died down, and an envoy brought a decree to Sun Chen, summoning him to the palace for a feast. As soon as Sun Chen got out of bed, he fell over as if someone had pushed him.

That put him on edge a bit. Then, a dozen or so envoys crowded into the room to accompany him to the palace.

Sun Chen's steward tried to talk him out of going, telling him, "Last night a violent gale blew nonstop. And this morning, you fell over for no reason. These are not good omens. You should not go to the feast."

But Sun Chen dismissed these concerns. "My brothers and I control the imperial guard. Who dares to even come near us? If anything goes wrong here, start a fire inside the compound as a signal."

So Sun Chen headed to the palace, where Sun Xiu left his seat at the banquet to personally greet him and offered him the seat of honor. After a few rounds of wine, people at the banquet suddenly said, "We can see a fire from outside the palace!"

Sun Chen tried to stand up, but Sun Xiu stopped him, saying, "We have plenty of troops outside, no need to worry."

Before Sun Xiu was even done talking, Zhang Bu stomped in with sword in hand and accompanied by 30-some armed guards. As they rushed in, they shouted, "We have an imperial edict to apprehend the traitor Sun Chen!"

Before Sun Chen could react, the guards had already seized him. Sun Chen now kowtowed to Sun Xiu, pleading, "I am willing to return all my possessions."

But Sun Xiu was not going to show him any mercy. He immediately ordered the guards to drag Sun Chen outside and behead him. Zhang Bu then announced to Sun Chen's followers that they were only after Sun Chen, no one else, and that put their minds at ease.

Next, Zhang Bu asked Sun Xiu to take his seat while Ding Feng and company brought in Sun Chen's four brothers. Sun Xiu ordered all of them, along with Sun Chen's entire clan, executed in public. The final headcount totaled several hundred. But that wasn't the end of it. Remember that Sun Chen's clan first came to power when his elder brother, Sun Jun (4), staged a coup some years ago to kill Zhuge Ke,

who was then the top official at court. Sun Jun was already dead at this point, but Sun Xiu had his body exhumed and beheaded. At the same time, he ordered proper graves built for Zhuge Ke and other victims of Sun Jun and Sun Chen. Those who had been exiled because of their connections to Zhuge Ke and company were now allowed to return home. And finally, the old general Ding Feng and others who helped carry out the latest coup were handsomely rewarded.

The kingdom of Wu then sent an envoy to the court of Shu to inform the Shu emperor Liu Shan of the latest change in administration. When the envoy returned to Wu, Sun Xiu asked him for his impression of the current state of Shu. The envoy said, “Recently, much of the affairs of state have been handled by the eunuch Huang (2) Hao (4), and most of the officials cater to his demands. In their court, not an honest word was heard. In their fields, the people show signs of starvation. As the saying goes, ‘The sparrows in the eaves are unaware that the mansion is about to burn down.’ ”

Hearing this report, Sun Xiu sighed and said, “If Zhuge Liang is still around, things would never have gotten this bad!” He then wrote another letter to Shu, telling them that Sima Zhao will usurp the throne in Wei any day now and then he would no doubt invade Wu and Shu as a demonstration of his might, so they should all be ready.

When the Shu commander Jiang Wei heard about this message, he immediately decided to use this as a justification for mounting another Northern campaign. In the year 259, Jiang Wei appointed the generals Liao Hua and Zhang Yi (4) as his vanguard and mobilized 200,000 troops. As he prepared to set out, he discussed with the general Xiahou Ba about where to strike first.

Xiahou Ba said, “Qi Mountain is a good place to deploy an army. We should advance through there. The late prime minister made six incursions through Qi Mountain precisely because nowhere else would do.”

Jiang Wei agreed, so his army marched toward Qi Mountain once again and set up camp at the mouth of the valley.

Waiting in his camp at Qi Mountain was Deng Ai, who had been busy organizing the Wei troops in the area. When his scouts reported that the Shu forces had set up three camps at the mouth of the valley, he went to a high vantage point to check it out for himself. Then, upon returning to camp, he rejoiced and said, "It's just as I expected!"

As it turns out, the Shu forces had set up camp exactly where Deng Ai wanted them to. Before the Shu army showed up, Deng Ai had dug an underground tunnel from his own camp to the mouth of the valley, where his enemy's camp now sat. As things stood, that tunnel ran right through the left camp of the Shu forces. Deng Ai now ordered his son and a lieutenant to each lead 10,000 men to attack the camps from left and right. And then he ordered another officer to take 500 men and sneak through the tunnel into the Shu camp around 9 o'clock that night.

Meanwhile, in the Shu army's left camp, the two generals in charge of that wing of the army slept with their armor on that night, because their camp had not yet been completed and they were worried the enemy would try to raid them before they were entrenched. And sure enough, all of a sudden, chaos broke out in their midst. And by the time they got their weapons and horses, they were also under attack from outside by Deng Ai's son Deng Zhong. With enemies outside and in, the Shu officers could not hold their ground, so they abandoned the camp and fled.

Meanwhile, Jiang Wei got word of the chaos breaking out in his left camp and immediately figured that Deng Ai had somehow snuck troops into his camp. He immediately got on his horse and held his ground at the main tent. He ordered that anyone who moved without permission would be executed. Next, he told his men that if they see any enemies approach their camp, just shower them with arrows

and crossbows, no questions asked. Then, he sent word to his right camp and told the men there to stay put.

And just as Jiang Wei expected, the Wei forces made a dozen or so attacks on his camp, but they were repelled every time by the arrows. This lasted till dawn, at which point the Wei forces no longer dared to attack, and Deng Ai called his men back to camp. As he did so, Deng Ai said, "Jiang Wei really learned Zhuge Liang's ways well! His soldiers were not frightened at night, and his officers did not panic in the face of the unexpected. He's a real commander!"

The next day, Jiang Wei picked up the pieces. He went easy on the two officers who could not hold down the left camp, blaming himself for not scouting the area better. He told them to go set up another camp and bury their dead in the tunnel. Hey look, pre-dug mass graves. How convenient.

Jiang Wei now sent a letter to Deng Ai challenging him to battle the next day, and Deng Ai said sure. And unlike the last time they did this, Deng Ai actually showed up this time. The next day, the two armies lined up in front of Qi Mountain. Jiang Wei deployed his men in the eight-fold formation that he learned from Zhuge Liang. When Deng Ai saw this, he, too, lined up his men in the same formation.

Jiang Wei now rode forth with spear in hand and shouted, "You can copy my formation, but do you know how it transforms?"

Deng Ai laughed and said, "Do you think you're the only one who knows this formation? I can set it up, so of course I know how it transforms!"

So Deng Ai now rode into his formation, told the guy giving signals to wave the command flag this way and that, and the formation turned into one with 64 gates. Deng Ai then rode back out and asked Jiang Wei, "What do you think of that?"

Jiang Wei was nonplused. "That was not bad," he said, "but do you dare to pit your formation against mine?"

Deng Air said sure. So the two sides now advanced toward each other, with their commanders directing traffic from the center of each formation. As the two formations collided, both held their form. But suddenly, Jiang Wei waved his flag and in the blink of an eye, his formation turned into a formation known as the Coiled Serpent, and it trapped Deng Ai in the center.

Now Deng Ai did NOT recognize this formation, and he began to panic as the action got hotter. The Shu forces were gradually closing in, and Deng Ai and his men were unable to break through. All they heard was the Shu soldiers chanting, "Deng Ai, surrender now!"

Looking skyward, Deng Ai sighed and said, "I got too full of myself for a moment and fell for Jiang Wei's trick!"

Just as the situation was looking dire, an army suddenly crashed in from the northwest corner. Recognizing these to be Wei soldiers, Deng Ai immediately took the opportunity to fight his way out of danger. The guy who saved him turned out to be Sima Wang (4), the commander of the town of Changcheng who was once saved by Deng Ai. So he now returned the favor. But while Deng Ai escaped with his life, he lost his camps at Qi Mountain as Jiang Wei's troops took control of those. Deng Ai was forced to fall back to the south bank of the Wei (4) River and pitch camp.

Deng Ai now asked Sima Wang, "How did you know this formation well enough to save me?"

Sima Wang answered, "In my youth, I traveled to seek teachers in south of Jing Province. I became friends with a couple well-known scholars and discussed this formation with them. What Jiang Wei set up today is called the Coiled Serpent Formation. If you attack it from anywhere else, it would do nothing. But I saw that the head of the formation laid in the northwest, so I attacked it from the northwest and was able to break it."

Deng Ai offered his gratitude and said, "Even though I studied the formation, I don't actually know how it transforms. Since you know its secrets, how about we go back tomorrow and try to reclaim our camps at Qi Mountain?"

But Sima Wang now began to hedge. “I don’t know if my knowledge is enough to fool Jiang Wei,” he said.

But Deng Ai had something else in mind. To see what he’s up to, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!