

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 145.

Last time, Jiang Wei had launched another Northern campaign. Yeah, I know. It sounds like a broken record by now. But this time, he got off to a pretty nice start. He bested Deng Ai in a contest of formations and took over Deng Ai's camps at Qi Mountain. Deng Ai only escaped with his life when his comrade Sima Wang (4) rescued him. It turned out that Sima Wang knew a little more about Jiang Wei's formation than Deng Ai did, and that gave Deng Ai an idea.

He told Sima Wang, "Tomorrow, while you engage Jiang Wei in a contest of formations, I will lead an army to launch a sneak attack on the backside of Qi Mountain. We will engage them on both sides and retake our camp."

So it was settled, and Deng Ai sent a message to Jiang Wei, challenging him to round two the next day, and Jiang Wei agreed. After sending Deng Ai's messenger away with his reply, Jiang Wei told his officers, "The late prime minister gave me a secret text that taught me the 365 permutations of this formation. Deng Ai challenging me to a contest of formations is a case of trying to show off in front of a master. But there must be deception afoot. Do you know what it could be?"

The general Liao Hua guessed, "They must be trying to distract us while they attack us from the rear."

"My thoughts exactly," Jiang Wei said with a smile as the screen faded to black.

The next day, Jiang Wei mobilized his entire army and deployed it in front of Qi Mountain. On the other side, Sima Wang led his forces out of their camp by the Wei River and went to meet Jiang Wei. Once the two sides lined up, the two commanders came out to talk.

Jiang Wei told Sima Wang, "Since you challenged me to a contest of formations, why don't you set one up for me to look at first?"

So Sima Wang deployed his men in the formation of the Eight Trigrams. But Jiang Wei laughed and told him, "That was my formation; you just stole it. What's so special about that?"

Sima Wang's answer was, "Oh yeah? Well, you stole it from somebody else, too. So ha!" Which, yeah, was pretty weak.

Jiang Wei now asked, "How many permutations does your formation have?" To which Sima Wang replied, "I can set up the formation, so of course I can make it change. This formation has 81 permutations."

Jiang Wei now smiled and said, "Why don't you show me a few?"

So Sima Wang went into his formation and directed his troops through several different permutations and then came back out and asked, "Did you recognize those permutations?"

Jiang Wei laughed and said, "My formation has 365 permutations according to the cycle of days. You are the proverbial frog in the well, possessing only a glimpse of a corner of the sky. What do you know about the intricacies of formations?"

Well, Sima Wang knew OF those 365 permutations, but he hadn't learned them all. But he was gonna fake it till he made it. He told Jiang Wei, "I don't believe you. Show me."

But Jiang Wei said, "Tell Deng Ai to come out, and I'll show it to him."

Uhh, well, that's a problem, since Deng Ai was nowhere near here. Sima Wang tried to cover it up, saying, "General Deng doesn't care for formations; he has other great strategies."

"What great strategy?!" Jiang Wei said as he laughed out loud. "He just told you to keep me busy while he launched a sneak attack on the back of Qi Mountain!"

Oh boy. Sima Wang knew the jig was up, so he tried to direct his men forward to engage Jiang Wei's troops in a scrum. But Jiang Wei simply pointed with his whip, and troops darted out from his two flanks, routing Sima Wang's men and setting them to flight.

Meanwhile, Deng Ai was sneaking around to the back of Qi Mountain. His vanguard had just turned the corner around a hill when suddenly, an explosive sounded, followed by drums and horns that made the sky tremble as hidden Shu forces attacked. They were led by the general Liao Hua, and before a word could be exchanged, Liao Hua had already cut down Deng Ai's vanguard general.

So I'm going to pause here for a second and ruminate briefly about Liao Hua. He's a bit of interesting character, as far as bit characters went. Here's a guy who has been in the story since episode 33, and he has been a regular in the Shu army for seemingly decades now. And judging from the fact that he is the vanguard general on this expedition, you would think he's well-regarded. Alas, history was not kind to Liao Hua. Today, he's best known for being the subject of an old saying that's basically the equivalent of "scraping the bottom of the barrel." The saying, which originated in a novel written some 1,400 years after Liao Hua's time, goes like this: "There were no elite generals in Shu, so Liao Hua was tabbed to be the vanguard." But hey, ask the guy he just cut down what he thinks about Liao Hua's skills.

Anyway, back to the story. Deng Ai was stunned by this sudden turn of events and quickly ordered a retreat. But then the Shu general Zhang Yi (4) showed up with an army and he and Liao Hua attacked Deng Ai from front and back. Deng Ai's troops were crushed, and Deng Ai himself suffered four arrow wounds but somehow managed to escape back to his camp at the Wei River. When he got there, Sima Wang also arrived, fresh off his own butt-whooping. The two now regrouped and discussed how to deal with Jiang Wei.

Sima Wang said, "Recently, the lord of Shu, Liu Shan, has been favoring the eunuch Huang (2) Hao (4) and indulging in wine and women. We can sow internal discord and have him recall Jiang Wei to relieve our current situation."

So Deng Ai sent one of his strategists to the Shu capital Chengdu to open a dialogue with this eunuch Huang Hao (4). And sure enough, the bribe changed hands, and the rumor was planted that Jiang Wei was holding a grudge against his own emperor and that he was going to defect to Wei very soon. The

rumor spread like wildfire and soon everyone in the city was talking about it. Huang Hao then reported to the emperor Liu Shan that hey, have you heard this about your top commander? Yeah I know, crazy right? But everyone is talking about it, so there must be some truth there. And sure enough, Liu Shan decided to send an envoy to summon Jiang Wei back to court immediately. And in case you forgot, the same thing once happened to Zhuge Liang. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, my name must be Liu Shan.

While this was happening, back on the front lines, Jiang Wei was challenging for battle every day, but Deng Ai kept refusing to fight him. Jiang Wei was just starting to get suspicious when the envoy arrived, telling him that he had been summoned back to court for unspecified reasons. Of course, that would mean having to shelf the thus-far successful campaign, but Jiang Wei, ever loyal in his heart, decided to obey his lord's command.

The general Liao Hua, however, begged to differ. He told Jiang Wei, "A commander in the field can ignore his lord's command. Even though you have been summoned, you must not move yet."

But Jiang Wei's other veteran general, Zhang Yi (4), said, "The people of Shu all hold a grudge against the commander for waging war year after year. Why don't we quit while we are ahead so as to comfort the people while we plan for another day."

Jiang Wei agreed with Zhang Yi (4) and ordered his troops to move out. When Deng Ai heard the news, he gave chase. But then he saw how organized and methodical the enemy's retreat was. He couldn't help but sigh and say, "Jiang Wei has learned Zhuge Liang's methods well!" And so Deng Ai did not dare to continue his pursuit and instead just led his army back to the camps at Qi Mountain, which Jiang Wei had to give up as he retreated.

Once Jiang Wei returned to the capital, he went to see Liu Shan to ask why he was recalled. Liu Shan said, "You have been on the frontlines for a long time. I was worried that the troops would be fatigued, so I recalled you. There was no other motive."

But Jiang Wei was way too smart to buy that. He told Liu Shan, "Your servant had already taken the enemy's camps at Qi Mountain and was just about to reap the rewards of our victory. But now, all that work has been for naught. This must be Deng Ai sowing distrust between us."

To this, Liu Shan made no answer, so Jiang Wei continued: "Your servant has sworn an oath to bring the rebels to justice and repay the kindness of the state. Your majesty must not listen to the words of the wicked and get suspicious."

After a long silence, Liu Shan said, "I am not suspicious of you. You may go back to Hanzhong. If the situation changes in the kingdom of Wei, then you may invade again."

Lamenting a wasted opportunity, Jiang Wei sighed, left the court, and headed back to Hanzhong.

Meanwhile, when Deng Ai received the report on this development at the Shu court, he said to Sima Wang, "When the lord and the vassal do not get along, something is going to happen." So Deng Ai sent word of this situation to Sima Zhao. Sima Zhao was delighted and began entertaining thoughts of conquering Shu.

But when he asked his adviser Jia (3) Chong (1) what he thought, Jia Chong told him, "You must not do it yet. His majesty is suspicious of you. If you leave the capital, there will be a coup. Last year, there were two sightings of a yellow dragon inside a well at the city of Ningling (2,2). All the officials congratulated the emperor on what they took to be a good omen, but he said, 'This is not a good omen. A dragon symbolizes the emperor. For it to be neither in the heavens nor in the fields, but rather trapped inside a well is to signify eclipse and confinement.' He then wrote a poem called the Ode on the Submerged Dragon, and its meaning clearly points to you, my lord. The poem says:

Weep for the dragon when he's taken,
And cannot prance beneath the waves,
Nor mount up on the Milky Way,
Nor show himself among the fields.
Deep inside the well he is coiled:
Before him loach and eel make free,
Safe from tooth or claw or scales --
Alas, I am the same as he.

When Sima Zhao heard this, he was enraged. "That man is trying to emulate Cao Fang!" he said to Jia Chong, referring to the previous emperor who was deposed by his brother Sima Shi for plotting against them. "If I don't move against him soon, he's going to move against me!"

"I am willing to help you do it whenever you need," Jia Chong replied.

So this was in the summer of the year 260. One day, Sima Zhao entered the court with his sword in tow. The emperor Cao Mao (2) quickly rose to greet him. The court officials then all said to Cao Mao, "The regent marshal's service and virtue are immense. He should be named the Duke of Jin (4) and given the Nine Dignities."

Well, we all kind of expected that to happen sooner or later, the way things were going. In fact, I guess I would have expected it to happen sooner, maybe with Sima Yi or Sima Shi. But now, Cao Mao simply looked down at the ground and said nothing. That prompted Sima Zhao to say sternly, "My father, brother, and I have rendered tremendous service to the kingdom. What would be the problem with me becoming the Duke of Jin (4)?"

Cornered, Cao Mao muttered, "I dare not disobey."

Sima Zhao now pressed him further, asking him, "In the Ode of the Submerged Dragon, you compared me and my kind to loach and eel. Why such disrespect?!"

To this, Cao Mao had no answer, and Sima Zhao simply flashed an icy smile and left, leaving all the officials present in fear. When Cao Mao returned to his private quarters that day, he was being attended by three officials. Now, all three of these officials had the last name Wang (2), which yeah, gets very confusing very quickly. So I'm just going to name the one who's not like the others. His name was Wang Jing (1). You've heard his name mentioned once or twice before as one of the Wei officers who went up against Jiang Wei at one point or another. He was now the Chief of the Secretariat, and Cao Mao poured his heart out to Wang Jing and the other two officials.

"Everyone knows Sima Zhao is about to usurp the throne," Cao Mao said. "I cannot sit idly by and suffer such humiliation. You must help me take him on!"

Uhh, yeah, no thanks. Wang Jing tried to talk his liege out of it. He told Cao Mao, "Right now, all the powers rest with the Sima clan. All the officials are ignoring propriety and are cravenly siding with the traitor. It's not just Sima Zhao alone. And your majesty's private guards are too few and too weak to carry out your command. If you cannot tolerate this for now, calamity will follow. Bide your time; do not do something rash."

But Cao Mao declared, "If I can tolerate THIS, then what can I NOT tolerate?! My mind is made up. I do not fear death!"

And with that, Cao Mao went to tell the empress dowager that he was going to take matters into his own hands. Meanwhile, the other two officials present said to Wang Jing, "The situation is dire. We must not bring destruction upon ourselves and our clans. We must go to Sima Zhao's residence and inform him at once so that we may be spared."

But Wang Jing flew into a rage. "The lord's grief is his vassal's shame. The lord's shame is his vassal's death! How dare you harbor disloyal thoughts?!"

But the other two guys were like, pfft, the heck with you, and they ran off to tell Sima Zhao. Momentarily, Cao Mao returned and ordered the captain of his guards to round up all the guards, manservants, and attendants in the palace, which totaled about 300. Raising a hubbub, they escorted Cao Mao out of the palace. Cao Mao carried a sword and rode in his royal litter, and shouted for his servants to move out.

Wang Jing now prostrated in front of the litter and wept, crying, "My lord! To take on Sima Zhao with these few hundred men is like herding sheep into the mouth of a tiger. Your death will be for nothing. I do not fear my own death, but what you are attempting is impossible!"

But Cao Mao refused to back down. "My army has disembarked. Do not stand in my way," he said as he headed for the palace gate.

Just then, he saw Sima Zhao's adviser Jia Chong (1) coming, armed, mounted, and flanked by two officers, one named Cheng (2) Cui (4), the other named Cheng (2) Ji (4). Behind them followed a few thousand imperial guards, shouting and charging this way.

Wielding his sword, Cao Mao shouted, "I am the emperor! Do you mean to charge in here and commit regicide?!"

Wielding a halberd, the officer Cheng Ji (4) looked at Jia Chong and asked, "Dead, or alive?"

"By Lord Sima's command, only dead," Jia Chong replied.

Without so much as blinking, Cheng Ji (4) rode toward the imperial carriage. Cao Mao shouted at him, "You scoundrel! How dare you show such disrespect?!"

Well, if Cao Mao thought that was disrespectful, just wait till he sees what happens next. Oh wait, he can't. Because before Cao Mao had even finished speaking, Cheng Ji's halberd had already pierced his chest. Cheng Ji retracted his halberd, pulling Cao Mao out of the carriage and onto the ground, and then finished the job with a thrust to the back of the emperor, running him through. The captain of Cao

Mao's guards now tried to stab Cheng Ji, but Cheng Ji took care of him with one thrust of the halberd as well, and the rest of Cao Mao's men all fled.

Just then, Wang Jing caught up to the carriage, and when he saw the emperor's body lying in a pool of blood, he cursed Jia Chong, "You traitor! How dare you kill your liege?!"

Enraged, Jia Chong had Wang Jing arrested and then sent word to Sima Zhao. Sima Zhao now rushed to the palace. When he saw Cao Mao's body, he was ... umm ... shocked and heartbroken. So much so that he banged his head against the ground as he kowtowed to his dead liege. Woe is this day. Woe.

Sima Zhao now sent word of Cao Mao's death to all the senior officials. When the imperial guardian Sima Fu (2) came in and saw Cao Mao's body, he wept and said, "I am to blame for your majesty's death!" He then ordered Cao Mao's body be placed in a coffin and placed at the west end of a side hall.

Sima Zhao now met with the court officials to discuss what's next. All the officials were present except Chen Tai, a supervisor in the Secretariat who, as you may remember, had been a veteran general responsible for defending the western borders against numerous Shu invasions. Sima Zhao sent Chen Tai's uncle to go summon him, but Chen Tai told his uncle tearfully, "People always measure me against you, but now I see that it is you who do not measure up to me!"

After telling his uncle off, Chen Tai donned mourning clothes and went to the palace, where he kneeled and wept in front of the coffin. Sima Zhao also managed to squeeze out a few crocodile tears, and then he asked Chen Tai, "Who should be punished for what happened today?"

"Only by executing Jia Chong can you appease the realm," was Chen Tai's answer.

After a long moment of silent thought, Sima Zhao asked Chen Tai, "Is there a less harsh way?"

"No. I can only think of harsher punishments," Chen Tai said.

Well, Sima Zhao was not going to execute Jia Chong, who was his confidant. So he now declared, "Cheng Ji committed treason. He will be carved to pieces, and his clan will be exterminated."

Wide-eyed in disbelief, Cheng Ji cursed Sima Zhao and yelled, "I am not at fault! It was Jia Chong who passed along YOUR orders!"

Well, we can't have him saying stuff like that all the way to the execution grounds, now can we? So Sima Zhao had Cheng Ji's tongue cut out. Now Cheng Ji could yell as much as he liked, and no one could make out what he was saying. And yell he did, all the way to his last breath. His brother Cheng Cui (4) was also executed, along with their entire clan. A poet later wrote these lines:

That year Jia Chong at Sima Zhao's command
Killed the king and stained the royal robes red.
Yet the punishment fell on Cheng Ji and his clan --
Pretending that deaf was the common man.

Sima Zhao now also ordered Wang Jing and his entire family arrested. At his trial, when Wang Jing saw his mother bound, he kowtowed and wept, saying, "Virtuous mother, your unfilial son has brought trouble upon you!"

But his mother laughed out loud and replied, "Everyone dies. What counts is dying well. To die for this leaves me with no regrets!"

The next day, Wang Jing and his entire family were taken to the execution grounds. Wang Jing and his mother met their fate with a smile, bringing tears to everyone in the city.

All this bloody business done, the imperial guardian Sima Fu (2) now requested that Cao Mao be given an emperor's burial, and Sima Zhao consented. Best not to give the impression that he had it out for the dead guy, you know?

Now, Jia Chong and company told Sima Zhao he should just go ahead and make himself emperor, but Sima Zhao said, "King Wen (2) of Zhou possessed two-thirds of the realm and still remained a vassal,

prompting the Great Sage Confucius to praise his virtue. And just as Cao Cao refused to take the throne from the Han, I now refuse to take the throne from the Wei.”

Of course, the only reason Cao Cao did not take the throne from the Han was because he was saving it for his son. Jia Chong and company knew that this was what Sima Zhao had in mind as well -- to leave the throne for his son, Sima Yan (2). So they dropped the matter.

In the sixth month of the year 260, Sima Zhao elevated to the throne Cao Huan (4), one of Cao Cao’s great grandsons. For his good work in the new emperor’s ascension, Sima Zhao was appointed prime minister and the Duke of Jin (4), and he was given loads of money and goodies, while all the other officials also got nice donatives.

Word of this soon trickled into Shu, and the commander Jiang Wei was delighted that he once again had a flimsy excuse to go to war. I mean, I HAVE to go punish Sima Zhao for ... umm ... killing the emperor that I’ve been trying to overthrow. Ah whatever. Let’s go.

Jiang Wei now mobilized 150,000 men and several thousand war chariots. The generals Liao Hua and Zhang Yi (4) were once again the vanguards. Liao Hua made for Ziwu (2,3) Valley, while Zhang Yi (4) headed toward Luo (4) Valley, and Jiang Wei marched to Xie (2) Gorge. Their aim was to conquer all three locations before they march through Qi Mountain.

Waiting for them once again was Deng Ai, presently in his base camp at Qi Mountain, drilling his troops. When he heard that three Shu armies were coming this way, he huddled with his staff. One of his advisers, a man named Wang (2) Guan (4), said, “I have an idea, but I cannot say it out loud. I have written it down. I hope you will consider it.”

So Deng Ai took a look at the note that Wang Guan (4) handed him and smiled. “This is a good idea, but I don’t know if it will fool Jiang Wei.”

“I am willing to risk my life and try,” Wang Guan said.

“Sir, your unwavering will guarantees success,” Deng Ai said. So he gave Wang Guan 5,000 men and sent him off.

Wang Guan traveled through the night out of Xie Gorge and ran into sentries from the front column of the Shu army. He told them that he was defecting and asked to see Jiang Wei. Jiang Wei ordered that Wang Guan alone be brought to him.

Prostrating on the ground, Wang Guan said, “I am the nephew of Wang Jing. Recently, Sima Zhao killed his liege and executed my uncle’s entire family. I despise him. Fortunately, you have come to punish him, so I am bringing the 5,000 men under my command to come surrender. I am willing to follow your command so that I may exterminate the traitors and avenge my uncle.”

Jiang Wei was delighted and told Wang Guan, “Since you are sincere, how can I not treat you with equal sincerity? My only worry for my army is our provisions. Right now, I have a few thousand carts of grain all at the entrance to the Riverlands. You can go escort them to Qi Mountain, while I go take the camp there.”

Secretly rejoicing about pulling the wool over Jiang Wei’s eyes, Wang Guan promptly accepted this order. Jiang Wei then said, “Since you’re just going to escort provisions, you don’t need all 5,000 of your men. Take 3,000 with you, and leave the other 2,000 to serve as guides for my attack on Qi Mountain.”

Wang Guan did not dare to say no, lest Jiang Wei gets suspicious, so he acquiesced and left with 3,000 of his men. Jiang Wei then ordered the general Fu (4) Qian (1) to lead the remaining 2,000 defecting soldiers. Just then, the general Xiahou Ba showed up and asked Jiang Wei, “Commander, how can you trust Wang Guan? When I was in the kingdom of Wei, even though I did not know the details, I had never heard of Wang Guan being Wang Jing’s nephew. Something is not right here. Please be on guard.”

Jiang Wei just laughed and said, “I already know Wang Guan was lying. That’s why I split up his men. I’m going to use his own scheme against him.”

Xiahou Ba asked Jiang Wei how he knew, and Jiang Wei explained, “Sima Zhao is as wily as Cao Cao. Since he has already executed Wang Jing and exterminated his clan, how could he have left Wang Jing’s nephew in command of troops in the outer territories? That’s why I knew he was lying. You and I are of one mind on this.”

To see how Jiang Wei will try to out-deceive the deceiver, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!