

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

In this episode, we are delving into the life of the real Sun Quan, the longtime ruler of the Southlands. In the novel, Sun Quan took over the reins of his family's enterprise at the age of 18, and he kept the Southlands safe for the next 52 years of his life, until his death at the age of 70. He was painted as a generally wise, if sometimes quick-to-anger, ruler. Let's see if the real history bears this out.

Sun Quan was born in the year 182, a couple years before the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion that kicked off our novel. Now, according to the author of the historical text the Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms, the Sun family came from humble backgrounds. But there's a legend that they were actually descendants of Sun Zi (3), he who wrote the now famous text the Art of War. But there is no proof of that, and it sounds like the kind of embellishment one might go back and tack onto one's family history after one had become the ruler of his own kingdom.

While Sun Quan's more distant family roots may be ordinary, his more immediate connections definitely made names for themselves. His father Sun Jian (1) made his name in helping to put down the Yellow Turban Rebellion and then became a prominent player in the early period of the novel. He was one of the 18 warlords who joined forces to take on the tyrannical prime minister Dong Zhuo. That coalition quickly dissolved, and Sun Jian went home to the Southlands to begin building his empire. But he was killed in the year 191 while waging war against Liu Biao, the imperial protector of Jing Province.

Four years after Sun Jian's death, his eldest son Sun Ce began his grand enterprise of carving out an empire in the Southlands. Sun Quan was only about 13 years old at this point, but he accompanied his brother on campaign and was said to have been one of his advisers. In fact, Sun Ce was so impressed by his younger brother that he felt Sun Quan was even more talented than himself. When they feasted with guests, Sun Ce apparently would often turn to Sun Quan and tell him, "All of these people will one day serve you."

By the time he was 17 years old, Sun Quan had begun leading troops for Sun Ce. A year later, Sun Ce was assassinated, and at the age of 18 or 19, Sun Quan became the patriarch of his family.

The early years of Sun Quan's reign were unsteady to say the least. At that point, his domain consisted only of six districts, and after he came into power, five of those six districts fell into rebellion. Even members of his own clan were plotting against him. One of his cousins was in secret contact with Cao Cao. Another launched an attack on one of the districts. And several other officials also staged insurrections.

To his credit, though, Sun Quan faced them all down. After a series of battles over three or four years, he managed to pacify the districts and bring some stability to his reign. I think this was more or less glossed over in the novel, which made it seem like Sun Quan was inexperienced and relatively untested when he was facing Cao Cao's invasion at Red Cliff. In reality, he had been fighting for his throne from the moment he sat down in it.

One of the things that really helped him was his penchant for bringing talented men into his administration. He certainly relied heavily on several key holdovers from his father and brother's regime, chief among them the adviser Zhang Zhao (1) and the generals Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu. But he also recruited quite a few other names that we have come to know quite well over the course of the novel, including strategists like Lu Su, Lu Xun, and Zhuge Jin (3), and generals like Gan (1) Ning (2) and Xu Sheng.

With all that talent at his disposal, Sun Quan went out avenging his father's death. After a couple false starts, he managed to kill the commander under Liu Biao who was responsible for his father's death in the year 208. Later that year, though, a much bigger threat loomed on the horizon. After Liu Biao died, Cao Cao marched South to gobble up Jing Province and soon turned his sights on the Southlands. Just like in the novel, most of Sun Quan's advisers were advocating submission, but Sun

Quan, backed by Zhou Yu and Lu Su, opted to ally with Liu Bei and fight. That, of course, culminated with the Battle of Red Cliff, where Cao Cao was defeated and retreated back to the North.

Now, in the novel, it seemed like everything that happened after the Battle of Red Cliff was all about Jing Province and Liu Bei. But in reality, Sun Quan had a life outside of Liu Bei, thank you very much. A couple years after Red Cliff, he launched a southern campaign. Now, the novel makes it sound like the Southlands were as far south as the empire went, but to the south of the Southlands was Jiao (1) Province, which encompassed the present-day southeastern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. The campaign went smoothly, and within the year, Sun Quan's domain ran all the way to the southeastern coast of present-day China.

Three years after that, in the year 213, Sun Quan had to turn his attention back to the North. Cao Cao was marching on the Southlands again, so Sun Quan went to meet him. The two sides engaged in a month-long standoff without either side gaining the upperhand. It was during this stalemate that Cao Cao remarked, "If you're going to have a son, he should be like Sun Quan," which coming from Cao Cao, was high praise indeed.

Another interesting incident happened during the stalemate. One day, Sun Quan took a warship to sail across the river to scout Cao Cao's movements. But when he got near, his ship was showered with a barrage of arrows, so many arrows, in fact, that the ship started to tilt toward the side that was taking all the shots. Thinking quickly, Sun Quan had his men turn the ship around so that the other side was facing Cao Cao. Once that side took its share of arrows, the ship stood up straight again, and Sun Quan was able to sail back to safety. If that sounds somewhat familiar, it's because the novel took this incident, dramatized it, and credited it to Zhuge Liang in the fictional episode where he used strawmen tied to ships to borrow arrows from Cao Cao.

So after that stalemate ended in a truce, things started to go sour between Sun Quan and Liu Bei. It played out more or less like in the novel. It really blew up in the year 219. That was when Sun Quan joined forces with Cao Cao and seized Jing Province, killing Liu Bei's general Guan Yu in the process.

So now that he's burned his bridge with Liu Bei, Sun Quan needed some backup, so he decided to ally himself with Cao Cao. In the year 221, when Cao Cao's son Cao Pi declared himself emperor and founded the kingdom of Wei, Sun Quan sent an envoy to request that he be allowed to become a vassal of Wei. Cao Pi agreed and granted Sun Quan the title of the king of Wu.

In that same year, Liu Bei came seeking revenge for Guan Yu's death, but within a year, Sun Quan, thanks to the genius of Lu Xun, turned away his foe. But before he could breathe a sigh of relief, things were going south with the North. The kingdom of Wei demanded that he send his crown prince to Wei as a hostage. When Sun Quan said no, Wei sent three armies to attack. Pressed, Sun Quan now turned back to Liu Bei and said, "My bad. Can we be friends again?" Fortunately for him, Liu Bei realized that he was in no position to actually reclaim Jing Province, so he, too, was looking to mend fences. So Shu and Wu were once again best buds.

In the year 229, Sun Quan finally declared himself emperor of Wu, officially forming the last of the three kingdoms. At this point, he had been running the family business for almost 30 years, and he was still just 47 years old. But it seems like his career had more or less peaked. He didn't really conquer any more significant territory. He made some more incursions into the North, but they didn't really go anywhere. Maybe that's why the latter half of the novel seems to focus so much on things happening elsewhere, and the Southlands only pop up every so often with cameo to remind us they're still around.

Now, that's not to say that Sun Quan didn't accomplish anything else of note. One of the things he accomplished was to expand China's exploration of the seas. He sent out ships to make contact with

people of various islands in the South China Sea, marking the first recorded interaction between China and those islands. There's speculation that one of those islands was Taiwan.

He also established a North-South trade route along the eastern coast of China. He did that to interact with the region of Liaodong (2,1), which lies in the northeastern corner of the empire. Remember in episode 136, we mentioned that Gongsun Yuan (1), the governor of that region, received an offer from Sun Quan to make him a king, but he decided to turn over Sun Quan's envoy to the kingdom of Wei instead. Before that happened, Sun Quan had established relations with Gongsun Yuan by sailing around the kingdom of Wei. That sea route would become an important trade route going forward.

Closer to home, Sun Quan also invigorated his kingdom's economy by implementing the policy of having soldiers till the soil. It was similar to what was practiced in the kingdom of Wei and on a smaller scale in the kingdom of Shu. Sun Quan also build a lot of irrigation works and several canals that were used for transportation.

But for all the good he did during his reign, Sun Quan ran into problems in the final decade of his life, and those problems ended up greatly weakening his court. It was all over the issue of succession. Sun Quan eldest son was his heir apparent, but that son died in the year 241. Sun Quan's second son died even earlier than that. So Sun Quan named his third son the new heir. The problem, though, was that Sun Quan had a fourth son whom he adored, and he treated the fourth son about the same as his new heir apparent. The fourth son let that go to his head and started thinking, "Hey, why am I not the heir? I want to be the heir. I DESERVE to be the heir!"

And so it began. When Sun Quan fell ill one time, his fourth son started moving against his brother by spreading lies that the third son was not at the ancestral temple praying for their father's health like he was supposed to, and that the third son's mother was even happy about Sun Quan's illness. When

Sun Quan heard about this, he became enraged, and his third son's mother ended up dying out of worry, and the heir apparent began to fall out of favor with Sun Quan.

Gradually, the friction between the two brothers grew to such a degree that it engulfed basically the entire court. All the court officials ended up on one side or the other in that fight. We're talking about guys like Lu (4) Xun (4), Zhuge Jin (3), Bu (4) Zhi (4) -- the highest of officials in the kingdom. It got so bad that even Lu Xun, the prime minister and the guy who once saved the kingdom, was reprimanded by Sun Quan so frequently that in the year 245, Lu Xun died of aggravation.

The succession crisis continued to rage, and it got so bad that the heir apparent ended up being placed under house arrest. The prime minister and some other officials tried to plead with Sun Quan for the release of the prince, but Sun Quan got ticked off by their actions, and the prime minister ended up being treated to 100 strokes and then getting exiled from the court. He was actually lucky, though. Some of the other guys ended up losing their heads.

After all of that, in the year 250, Sun Quan just got tired of all this drama and decided to put an end to it. He stripped his third son of his heir apparent status and exiled him. So that's good news for the fourth son, right? Well, not so much. See, the third son was actually lucky. He only got exiled. The fourth son, on the other hand, got death. Sun Quan forced him to commit suicide, and some of the officials who allied with him lost their heads, too. When the dust settled, Sun Quan named his seventh and youngest son, Sun Liang, as the new heir apparent.

The fallout from this decade-long struggle was costly. Because of all the power struggle at court between the two factions, many officials were either exiled or executed, and that dealt a huge blow to the talent base at court. It also left a child as the heir. When Sun Quan died two years later, the new emperor of the kingdom was just 10 years old. That created a power vacuum and no shortage of struggles among various to control that power. In many ways, the instability of the Wu court after Sun Quan's death could be traced back to the succession crisis.

But by the time that chaos manifested itself, Sun Quan was not around to see it anymore. He died in the year 252, ending a reign of 23 years as emperor of Wu. But of course, he was in charge of the Southlands for much longer than that. Remember that he took over the family enterprise in the year 200, so in all, he ruled over the region for 52 years, and whether through diplomacy or war, he managed to keep his domain from being swallowed up by either Wei or Shu, making him truly one of the most remarkable figures in an era filled with them.

Alright, that wraps it up for Sun Quan. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!