

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 151.

Last time, the last flicker of hope for the kingdom of Shu died with Jiang Wei, who killed himself after a failed coup that also claimed the lives of the Wei commanders Zhong Hui and Deng Ai. After order was restored, the former Shu emperor Liu Shan was taken to the Wei capital Luoyang, where Sima Zhao threatened to have him executed for his corrupt ways.

Just as Liu Shan was about to wet himself, other court officials said, "Since the Lord of Shu lost his kingdom, he surrendered to us in a timely manner. We should spare him."

So Sima Zhao appointed Liu Shan as the Duke of Anle (1,4), which translates to the Duke of Peace and Joy, or more aptly, the Duke of Comfort. Liu Shan got a place to live in the capital, as well as a monthly stipend, 10,000 bolts of silk, and 100 servants. His son and the officials who followed him to the capital were also given titles. Liu Shan offered up his gratitude and left, happy to escape with his head.

One guy who did not escape with his head was the eunuch Huang Hao. He had dodged death one time before thanks to generous bribes, but nothing would save him now. Sima Zhao had him taken to the public market, where he was suffered a literal death by thousand cuts.

Word of Liu Shan's fate got back to Huo (4) Ge (1), one of the last holdouts in the Riverlands. Huo Ge, who oversaw a district in the southern tip of Shu, had sworn that if Liu Shan was treated unkindly, he would never surrender. But now, seeing that his former lord got a pretty good deal, Huo Ge and his troops surrendered to Wei.

The day after he was named the Duke of Comfort, Liu Shan went to Sima Zhao's residence to offer his thanks again. Sima Zhao threw a feast for him. The entertainment at this feast began with Wei-style dancing, which made all the former Shu officials sad since it reminded them that they were now in a foreign land. Liu Shan, however, seemed to be enjoying himself.

After the Wei-style dance concluded, Sima Zhao ordered some Riverlanders to play the music of their homeland. Now THIS cut like a knife, and the former Shu officials all wept. But Liu Shan alone laughed with amusement and did not seem embarrassed at all.

After a few rounds of wine, Sima Zhao said to his adviser Jia Chong, "How can one be so heartless. Even if Zhuge Liang was alive, he would not have been able to keep him safe for long, much less Jiang Wei."

Sima Zhao then turned to Liu Shan and asked him, "Do you miss Shu?"

"It's fun here; I do not miss Shu," Liu Shan answered.

Oh man. This guy. I swear. Anyway, moments later, Liu Shan excused himself to go use the bathroom. One of his former officials, Xi (4) Zheng (4), followed him and said, "My lord, why did you say that you did not miss Shu? If he asks you again, you should weep and say that your ancestor's tombs are all far away in Shu, so your heart aches for the west and you think about it every day. Then the Duke of Jin would no doubt allow you to return to Shu."

Liu Shan said ok and went back to the feast. After a few more cups, he was starting to get a buzz. Sima Zhao now asked him again, "Do you miss Shu?"

Right on cue, Liu Shan repeated verbatim the answer that Xi Zheng had provided, except for one problem. He couldn't squeeze out any tears. So he just closed his eyes.

"Did Xi Zheng tell you to say this?" Sima Zhao asked him.

Liu Shan's eyes opened with surprise. "Yes, truly that is the case," he answered.

Oh c'mon man! This guy was a real piece of work, wasn't he? While Xi Zheng and the other former Shu officials were flushed with embarrassment, Sima Zhao and his entourage had a good laugh. But humiliation aside, this actually worked out kind of ok for Liu Shan. Because of this episode, Sima Zhao saw that he was, despite all his flaws, an honest man and so no longer suspected him. A later poet wrote these lines about Liu Shan:

A pleasure-seeker, his face alight with smiles,
No hint of sorrow for the world now gone,
Making merry in a foreign land, the old one out of mind --
It's clear now he was never worthy of his father's throne.

And just as a postscript here, Liu Shan has gone down in history as perhaps the most useless of rulers. He's not loathed like tyrants whose cruel ways ended dynasties. Rather, he's scorned for his lack of ability and, worse, apparent lack of regret for having squandered his kingdom. To this day, his infant name, "Adou (1,3)," is commonly used to describe a useless person. And to think, Zhao Yun rescued him from Cao Cao's army all those years back for this.

Having vanquished the kingdom of Shu, Sima Zhao's renown grew again, and the court officials now recommended that the emperor Cao Huan (4) elevate him from duke to king. Well, Cao Huan knew what was good for him, so he went along with it, and Sima Zhao became the King of Jin. His father Sima Yi and brother Sima Shi both received posthumous kingships.

Now that he was a king, Sima Zhao got to name an heir apparent. He had two sons, the elder named Sima Yan (2), and the younger named Sima You (1). Sima Yan was a man of imposing stature, with hair so long that it touched the ground and arms that extended past his knees. He had a quick mind, a heroic air, and impressive courage. As for Sima You (1), he was a mild and gentle soul who was respectful, reserved, filial, and brotherly.

Now, Sima Zhao's elder brother Sima Shi had no son of his own, so before he died, Sima Shi adopted Sima You (1) to continue his own line. And Sima Zhao often said, "The empire belongs to my elder brother." So when Sima Zhao was elevated to the King of Jin, he thought about making Sima You (1) his

heir apparent, but his advisers were all against it. Among other things, they cited precedents for how elevating a younger son over an older son was a recipe for disaster. They also sang the praises of Sima Yan. Eventually, Sima Zhao was convinced to make Sima Yan his heir.

When Sima Zhao officially named his heir, one of his officials told him, “Sometime ago in Xiangwu (1,3) County, a man descended from the sky. He was tall and had long feet, with white hair and eyebrows. He wore a yellow shirt and a yellow headscarf and walked around with a cane made of goosefoot wood. He declared, “I am the people’s king. I have come to let you know that if the empire has a new ruler, it would know peace immediately. He paraded around the town like that for three days before vanishing. This is an auspicious sign for your lordship. You should begin dressing and acting like an emperor.”

Secretly delighted by this counsel, Sima Zhao returned to his palace. He was just about to sit down to dinner when he suffered a stroke that was so severe that he lost the power of speech. By the next day, when some of his confidants came to check on him, Sima Zhao could not speak and simply pointed at his heir apparent Sima Yan before breathing his last.

One of Sima Zhao’s senior officials, He (2) Ceng (2), now said, “The affairs of the empire all rest on the shoulders of the King of Jin (4). We should elevate his heir as the new king before tending to funeral services.”

So we’re now in the fall of the year 265, and the Sima clan’s power has transferred to the hands of Sima Yan (2). Upon assuming the title of the king of Jin, Sima Yan promoted a number of his father’s trusted officials. After burying his father, Sima Yan summoned two of those officials -- Jia (3) Chong (1) and Pei (2) Xiu (4) -- and asked them, “Did Cao Cao really once say, ‘If heaven’s mandate lies with me, then I shall be King Wen (2) of Zhou (1)?’ ”

So let me refresh your memory here. In the novel, Cao Cao made that statement when his officials tried to persuade him to declare himself emperor. He refused and said, "Let me be King Wen of Zhou." Well, King Wen of the founder of the ancient Zhou Dynasty. He was revered in part because even though he had control of most of the empire and held immense power, he refused to take the throne from his lord, preferring to remain a vassal, at least in name. He left it to his son to be the one to officially do away with the previous dynasty and usher in the 800-year reign of the Zhou.

So, when Cao Cao made that statement, he was telling his officials that they should instead focus on making his son emperor after he was gone. And now, when Sima Yan inquired about that story, his officials immediately understood what he was hinting at.

Jia Chong told Sima Yan, "Cao Cao and his forefathers had received the benevolence of the Han, so he was afraid people would call him a usurper. That's why he made that statement. He meant for his son Cao Pi to become emperor."

"How does my father compare to Cao Cao?" Sima Yan next asked.

"Even though Cao Cao had immense accomplishments, the people were more intimidated by his power than moved by his virtue," Jia Chong said. "When Cao Pi inherited his enterprise, his heavy military requirements pushed the people hither and yonder without respite. Your grandfather and uncle rendered immense service to the state and spread their virtue and kindness so that they won all the hearts of the empire. Your father conquered Shu, which was a towering achievement that surpasses anything Cao Cao did."

Liking what he heard, Sima Yan now said, "If Cao Pi could take over the reign of the Han, then why can't I take over the reign of the Wei?"

That was exactly what Jia Chong and Pei (2) Xiu (4) had been waiting to hear. They immediately bowed and said, "Your highness should follow Cao Pi's precedent. Repeat the ceremony of accepting the Wei's abdication and take over the throne."

The next day, Sima Yan went to the emperor's palace with sword in tow. Now, the emperor, Cao Huan (4), had been on pins and needles and had not held court for days. When he saw Sima Yan stomping into his private quarters, Cao Huan hurriedly got up to welcome him. Sima Yan did not stand on ceremony and promptly sat down and said, "Who is responsible for the Wei's empire?"

"It's a gift from your father and grandfather," Cao Huan answered.

Scoffing, Sima Yan said, "In my view, your highness has neither the scholarship to discuss the way of government nor the martial skills to lead campaigns. Why don't you make way for someone with talent and virtue to be in charge?"

Shocked by this audacity, Cao Huan was speechless with mouth agape. One of his attendants, however, had no shortage of things to say about this. He shouted, "King of Jin, you are mistaken! Our founding emperor Cao Cao campaigned far and wide and conquered the empire through much hard work. Our present emperor possesses virtue and has committed no offense. Why should he abdicate?"

Sima Yan did not take kindly to that. "The dynastic altars belong to the Han. Cao Cao used the Han emperor as his puppet and named himself the King of Wei, usurping the Han's throne. My family has served the Wei for three generations. The Wei possesses the empire not because of the House of Cao, but because of the House of Sima. Everyone knows this, so why can't I inherit the reign of the Wei?"

"If you do that, you would be a treasonous usurper!" the attendant said angrily.

Well, congratulations man. Your death wish has been granted. Sima Yan shot back, "What's wrong with me avenging the House of Han?!" He then had the attendant beaten to death in the hall. This scene reduced Cao Huan to tears as he knelt on the floor. After Sima Yan stomped off, Cao Huan asked the officials Jia Chong and Pei (2) Xiu (4), "What should I do in such a dire situation?"

If Cao Huan was looking for support, he was barking up the wrong tree with those two guys, who were squarely in Sima Yan's pocket.

“The heavenly-ordained time has ended,” Jia Chong said. “Your majesty must not disobey the will of heaven. You should follow the precedent of the last Han emperor. Reconstruct the Altar for Abdication, conduct a formal ceremony, and pass your throne to the King of Jin. That will be in accordance with both heaven and the people, and your safety will be guaranteed.”

Well, it's not like Cao Huan really had any other choices. I mean, he came to the throne after his predecessor was run through with a halberd by one of Sima Zhao's officers. So he knew which end of the dog was doing the wagging. He took Jia Chong's suggestion and built the altar. On February 4 of the year 266, Cao Huan ascended the altar with the imperial seal while all the officials assembled. Sima Yan then ascended the altar, took the seal, and Cao Huan then stepped down, put on the outfit of a vassal, and stood at the head of all the officials. Sima Yan then sat down atop the altar, while Jia Chong and Pei Xiu stood on his left and right with swords in hand, ordering Cao Huan to kneel and hear his fate.

“It has been 45 years since the Wei inherited the reign of the Han,” Jia Chong proclaimed. “Today, the Wei's time is up, and the mandate of heaven lies with the Jin. The Sima clan's immense service and virtue reach the bounds of heaven and earth, and it is only right that they should assume the throne and inherit the reign of the Wei. You will be appointed the Lord of Chenliu (2,2) and you shall take up residence in the town of Jinyong (1,1). Depart immediately, and do not return to the capital without being summoned.”

Weeping, Cao Huan offered up his gratitude and left. Now among his former court, there was one official who refused to serve the new boss, and surprisingly, it was a member of the Sima clan. Sima Fu (2), the imperial guardian, wept as he kneeled in front of Cao Huan and said, “I will forever be a vassal of Wei and will never betray it.”

When he saw such a display of loyalty, Sima Yan gave Sima Fu a lordship, but Sima Fu refused and retired from court instead. Everyone else, meanwhile, had no such compunctions about welcoming the

new boss. They all prostrated in front of the altar and declared Sima Yan the new emperor. The kingdom's name now changed to Jin (4), and thus ended the 45-year run of the Wei. You might call it poetic justice for a kingdom whose existence began with a similar ceremony, but with the Cao clan on the other side. A poet later wrote these lines:

Jin's model was Cao Cao, king of Wei.

And the Prince of Chenliu recalls the Lord of Shanyang.

Again the rite of transfer on the stage --

He thinks back to the time and grieves.

Of course, like any good ascension, Sima Yan not only made himself emperor, but he also went back and posthumously declared his father Sima Zhao, his uncle Sima Shi, and his grandfather Sima Yi all emperors. He also established seven temples to honor his various forefathers.

Now that that was all taken care of, Sima Yan turned his sights on the unfinished business of completing the reunification of the empire, and that was bad news for the kingdom of Wu. The emperor of Wu, Sun Xiu, knew it, too. In fact, he was so worried that he became bedridden and was soon making succession plans. He summoned his prime minister, Pu (2) Yangxing (2,4), and his heir, Sun Wan (1). Holding Pu (2) Yangxing's (2,4) arm, Sun Xiu pointed at his son and died.

Pu Yangxing then met with the other officials and wanted to elevate Sun Wan (1) as emperor, but one senior official objected and said, "Sun Wan is too young to govern. Why don't we make Sun Hao (4) the emperor instead?"

Zhang Bu (4), the General of the Left, agreed. "Sun Hao has the talent, insight, intelligence, and decisiveness for the throne," he said.

Pu Yangxing could not make up his mind, so he tried to defer to the empress dowager. But the empress dowager was like, why are you trying to push on me? I'm just a woman. I know nothing about such matters. You and the other court officials work it out. And so, with the decision thrown back into his lap, Pu Yangxing eventually settled on Sun Hao as the new emperor.

So this Sun Hao was the son of Sun Quan's first heir apparent Sun He (2). Remember that this Sun He (2) died well before his father, so he never got to sniff the throne. Now, his son Sun Hao had just been made emperor. But as everyone will soon discover, this was a decision they would all come to regret.

The problem was that Sun Hao soon showed himself to be intolerably cruel and violent, and he sank ever deeper into vice and luxury, which was a bad combination. I mean, if you're going to rule with an iron fist, at least rule competently. But Sun Hao did no such thing and instead fell under the influence of ... you guessed it ... a meddling eunuch. When Pu Yangxing and Zhang Bu tried to point out the errors of his ways, they chose their words poorly and Sun Hao ended up ordering their entire clans be exterminated. After that, everyone at court learned to shut their mouth. Sun Hao then named a couple new prime ministers and got back to the business of living the high life at his people's expense. He took up residence at the city of Wuchang (3,1) and levied heavy tributes on his people. He lived so extravagantly that he emptied the private AND the public purse. It got so bad that one of his new prime ministers felt he had to say something, the fate of his predecessor notwithstanding. He wrote a memorial to Sun Hao, which said:

"No calamity has struck, and yet the people are drained. Nothing has been undertaken, and yet the state treasury is empty. How deeply I deplore it. When the Han was weak, three houses arose. Now, the houses of Cao and Liu have both lost their way and fallen to the Jin. Their example is plain to all. Your foolish servant is just concerned for your kingdom. The terrain around Wuchang is difficult and unproductive. It is not a place for a royal capital. Also, a recent children's jingle says, 'Better Jianye (4,4)

water than Wuchang fish to eat. Better dead in Jianye than alive in Wuchang seat.’ This rhyme illustrates the mood of the people and the mind of heaven.

The kingdom has less than a year’s reserves. A crisis is brewing. Our officials and officers make onerous exactions and gain wide disfavor. The harem had less than 100 concubines at the time of the Great Emperor, Sun Quan. But it has grown to more than 1,000 since the the time of the Emperor Jing (3), Sun Xiu (1). This is an unconscionable waste of resources. Furthermore, unfit royal attendants fight amongst themselves and plot against the loyal and worthy. They are all a plague upon the government and the people. I implore your highness to reduce the people’s burden of military service and labor, remove onerous exactions, reduce the number of women in the palace, and purge the corrupt officials. Then the kingdom will know peace, heaven will rejoice, and the people will commit themselves to you.”

Alas, Sun Hao did not care for this advice, but at least he let this prime minister keep his head. Instead, he just said, “Oh you don’t want me to spend more money? Just watch.” He proceeded to launch another palace construction project. And for this one, he commanded that all the officials and officers had to personally go into the hills to gather lumber. He also summoned a diviner and asked him how to go about conquering the entire empire, because, right, he was absolutely in a position to do that.

The diviner said, “Your highness has received a fortunate answer. Fourteen years from now, your blue canopy will enter the Jin capital Luoyang.”

Well, that sounds great, Sun Hao thought. He summoned his treasurer and said, “Upon your advice, the late emperor, my father, had his commanders extend a line of hundreds of camps along the banks of the Great River, and he put the veteran general Ding Feng in command. I intend to claim all the territories that once belonged to the Han and avenge the Lord of Shu. Which territory should I take first?”

The treasurer was probably doing an insane eyeroll in his mind over this ridiculous idea, and he said, "Now that the Shu capital has fallen and their kingdom has collapsed, Sima Yan will no doubt harbor thoughts of gobbling up our state. Your highness should develop your virtue and bring security to the people of the Southlands. That is the best course of action. If you mobilize the army, it would be like trying to put out a fire with dry hemp. You will end up burning yourself. Please think it through."

To that, Sun Hao said, "After careful consideration, I respectfully disagree." Actually, he flew into a rage and said, "I am just about to reinvigorate our enterprise, and yet you are speaking such unlucky words. If you didn't serve under the late emperor, I would cut off your head as a warning!"

And so Sun Hao had his guards kick the treasurer out of the palace. As he departed, the treasurer sighed and said, "Pity that this beautiful land will soon belong to someone else!" And he proceeded to just stay home from then on.

Meanwhile, Sun Hao busied himself with preparations for war. He ordered Lu (4) Kang (4), the son of the illustrious general Lu Xun, to garrison troops at the mouth of the river, looking for an opportunity to take the key city of Xiangyang (1,2).

Word of this development quickly reached the Jin capital, and the emperor Sima Yan assembled his officials to discuss how to respond. The official Jia Chong stepped forth and said, "I have heard that the Lord of Wu, Sun Hao, is unvirtuous and immoral. Your majesty should send the commander Yang (2) Hu (4) to lead an army to repel the enemy. Then, when an opportunity presents itself, we can attack, and Dongwu will be ours for the taking."

Sima Yan did as Jia Chong suggested and dispatched a decree to Xiangyang (1,2) to order Yang Hu to meet the enemy. Yang Hu then organized his troops and prepared for battle. During his tenure overseeing the defense of Xiangyang, Yang Hu earned the love of the soldiers and the people. There were a lot of Southlanders in his ranks. These were soldiers who had surrendered to Wei in previous

battles. Now, Yang Hu allowed anyone among them who wished to return to the Southlands to do so. He also reduced the number of soldiers on patrol, using them to cultivate a large amount of land instead. This paid off. When Yang Hu first took over command, the army had less than a hundred days' worth of provisions. But by year's end, they had accumulated enough grain for 10 years.

Yang Hu was also not one for big military displays. When he was with the army, he did not wear armor. Instead, he only donned a light fur jacket cinched with a broad belt, and he never had more than 10 guards at his command tent.

One day, a lieutenant came to report that the scouts were saying the enemy had dropped their guard, so now would be the perfect time to strike. But Yang Hu laughed and said, "You underestimate Lu Kang. He is very crafty. When his lord sent him to attack the city of Xiling (1,2), he killed a general and scores of officers before I could get there. With him commanding the enemy forces, we can only stay on the defensive. When the situation changes within the enemy's ranks, then we can think about attacking. If we advance lightly and without regard for the situation, we would be inviting defeat.

That little spiel impressed his officers, so the Jin forces just stayed on their side of the border for the time being. To see how long this stalemate will last and how it will finally end, tune in next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!