

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast. This is episode 9.

Thank you to everyone who has been listening, commenting, and reviewing the show. As I have said before, knowing that I have an audience, and a growing audience at that, really helps motivate me to keep going and keep improving. It's really cool to have someone tell me that the podcast is helping them get into a novel that they are interested in. That's part of the reason I started this podcast, and it's great to hear that I am helping someone discover a Chinese classic. So thanks again for tuning in.

Last time, we left Sun Jian in a bit of a pickle. He had discovered the Imperial Hereditary Seal, which he took to be a sign from heaven that he was destined to rule. So he quickly ditched the coalition forces and took his army back home to the south. But Yuan Shao was not happy about this and asked Liu Biao (3), the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province, to attack Sun Jian on the way. Liu Biao (3) lured Sun Jian into an ambush and surrounded him.

Fortunately for Sun Jian, his three generals -- Cheng (2) Pu (3), Huang (2) Gai (4), and Han (2) Dang (1) -- came to the rescue, and they fought their way out and managed to return to their home base, the Jiangdong (1,1) region. However, Sun Jian lost more than half of his army. From this point on, he and Liu Biao were enemies. They will soon try to settle the score, but for now, we'll let their feud simmer for a while and check in on Yuan Shao.

The last time we talked about Yuan Shao, he had seen the writing on the wall and realized that the coalition against Dong Zhuo was about to fall apart, so he took his army and went to Henei (2,4) Prefecture just before the coalition imploded. But while he was stationed in Henei (2,4), his army was short on food. Fortunately for him, Han (2) Fu (4), the imperial protector of Ji (4) Province, sent some provisions. Now you figure Yuan Shao would be quite grateful for this act of generosity, but you would figure wrong. One of Yuan Shao's advisers, Feng (2) Ji (4), goaded his master.

"A real man would do as he pleases, rather than wait for someone to give him food." Feng (2) Ji (4) said. " Ji (4) Province has ample wealth and food. Why don't you take it?"

“I haven’t come up with a good plan to do it yet,” Yuan Shao answered.

“We can send a secret message to Gongsun Zan and order him to attack Ji (4) Province and promise that you will help him if he does.” Feng (2) Ji (4) said. “Han (2) Fu (4) is an idiot. When Gongsun Zan’s army starts marching, he will surely ask you to oversee the affairs of the province. That will be your opportunity, and the province will be delivered into your hands.”

Yuan Shao liked that plan, so he sent a dispatch to Gongsun Zan, proposing that they launch a two-prong attack on Ji Province and split the region evenly upon its conquest. Gongsun Zan was thrilled at this prospect and immediately set out.

And then, that sneaky Yuan Shao turned around and sent a secret message to Han (2) Fu (4), telling him, “Hey, I just found out that Gongsun Zan is on his way here to kick your butt and take your land. Just thought you would like to know.” Han (2) Fu (4) panicked upon hearing this and summoned two of his advisers. One of them offered up the most brilliant suggestion.

“Gongsun Zan is coming with a huge army that cannot be stopped. Besides, he has the help of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei. It will be hard to stand up to him,” this adviser said. “Yuan Shao is wise and brave, and he has numerous capable warriors at his command. If you ask him to help oversee the affairs of the province, he will surely repay you with generosity, and you will have no need to worry about Gongsun Zan.”

Well, either this adviser was severely overpaid, or he has been handsomely paid off by Yuan Shao, because this was exactly what Yuan Shao was hoping for. Han (2) Fu (4) listened to this guy and sent one of his officers, Guan (1) Chun (2), to invite Yuan Shao. However, another officer, Geng (3) Wu (3), tried to talk some sense into him.

“Right now Yuan Shao is a needy man with a hungry army, and he is totally dependent on us,” Geng (3) Wu (3) said. “He is like an infant in the arms of his mother. If you don’t let him suckle, he will die. Why would you want to entrust him with the affairs of the province? It would be like leading a tiger into a

herd of sheep.”

But Han (2) Fu (4) dismissed this.

“I am a client of the Yuan family, and my talent cannot match that of Yuan Shao,” he said. “Even the ancients suggests yielding to sages. Why are you all so jealous?”

Well, that was pretty much the equivalent of a coach telling his team BEFORE the game that they are about to lose to a better team and that it’s ok. As you can imagine, that was not a morale booster. Thirty-some officials quit and left. Cheng (3) Wu (3) and Guan (1) Chun (2), however, stayed and waited outside the city, looking to ambush Yuan Shao.

A few days later, Yuan Shao and his army arrived. As they passed, Cheng (3) Wu (3) and Guan (1) Chun (2) leaped out from hiding and drew their knives to kill Yuan Shao. However, Yuan Shao was closely flanked by his top two generals -- Yan (2) Liang (2) and Wen (2) Chou (3). These two made quick work of the assassins, and in the blink of an eye, Cheng (3) Wu (3) and Guan (1) Chun (2) laid dead.

Once Yuan Shao entered the city, he ... umm ... bestowed a great honor upon Han (2) Fu (4), naming him the General of Grand and Vigorous Courage, an impressive title that came with absolutely no power at all. All of the affairs of the province were handed out to Yuan Shao’s closest advisers, and Han (2) Fu (4) was left out in the cold. It didn’t take long for Han (2) Fu (4) to regret yielding to a sage. He ended up ditching his family and riding off alone to seek refuge with Zhang (1) Miao (3), the governor of Chenliu Prefecture. And we’ll just let him go, since he has already fulfilled his role in the story -- the idiot who willingly handed Yuan Shao a fat province from which to build up his power base.

But Yuan Shao couldn’t rest easy in his new home just yet. There’s still the little matter of his promise to Gongsun Zan that he would share the province with him if Gongsun Zan marched against Han (2) Fu (4). Well, seeing that Yuan Shao now has control of Ji Province, Gongsun Zan sent his younger brother Gongsun Yue (4) to see Yuan Shao and ask when they could move in. Yuan Shao told Gongsun Yue (4),

“Please ask your brother to come in person, and we can discuss this matter face to face.”

So Gongsun Yue (4) took his leave and set off for home. He hadn't gone far, however, when an army stormed out from the side of the road and shouted, "We are the personal guards of prime minister Dong Zhuo!" and they killed Gongsun Yue (4) with a torrent of arrows.

Gongsun Yue's (4) attendants escaped the attack and brought the news home to Gongsun Zan. And Gongsun Zan guessed, as you probably did as well, that this had nothing to do with Dong Zhuo and everything to do with Yuan Shao, and he flew into a rage.

"Yuan Shao! You talked me into marching against Han (2) Fu (4) so that you could seize the opportunity and steal the province. And now your men have killed my brother and dare to pretend to be Dong Zhuo's soldiers. How can I not avenge this?!"

And so Gongsun Zan mobilized his entire army and marched on Ji Province. Yuan Shao led his army out to meet him. The two sides faced off on a bridge over the River Pan (2), with Yuan Shao's army on the east side of the bridge and Gongsun Zan's army on the west side.

Gongsun Zan sat atop his horse on the bridge and shouted toward the other side:

"You dishonorable scoundrel, how dare you trick me?!"

Yuan Shao also rode onto the bridge and pointed at Gongsun Zan.

"Han (2) Fu (4) was a useless man, and he willingly ceded Ji Province to me. What business is it of yours?"

"I use to think you were a loyal and honorable man and made you the leader of the coalition," Gongsun Zan shot back. "But now I see that you have the heart of a wolf and the actions of a dog. How can you look the world in the face?!"

This ticked off Yuan Shao, and he asked his men, "Who can go capture him?"

Before he finished speaking, one of his top two generals, Wen (2) Chou (3), galloped onto the bridge hoisting his spear. Gongsun Zan met him and they fought on the bridge. But before they had exchanged a dozen bouts, Gongsun Zan was already faltering, so he turned and ran toward his own lines.

Wen (2) Chou (3) followed in hot pursuit. When Gongsun Zan fled into his own lines, Wen Chou followed him into the heart of his army and wreaked havoc all over the place. Four of Gongsun Zan's officers tried to gang up on Wen Chou, but he needed just one thrust to kill one of them, which sent the other three fleeing.

With no one really wanting to get in his way, Wen Chou chased Gongsun Zan all the way through his lines and out the back of his army. Gongsun Zan fled toward a valley, while Wen Chou galloped behind him and shouted for him to surrender. By now, Gongsun Zan was looking pretty sorry. He had lost his bow, arrow, and even his helmet, and his hair hanged around his shoulders. As he headed toward the valley, his horse suddenly lost its footing, and Gongsun Zan tumbled to the ground.

Seeing this, Wen Chou hurried forward to deliver the killing blow. But just then, around the left side of the hill appeared a young warrior. He galloped into the fray with spear in hand and engaged Wen Chou in combat. While Wen Chou was occupied, Gongsun Zan got back on his feet and climbed up to the top of the hill to watch the action.

From there, he could see that the young warrior was about 6 feet tall, with bushy eyebrows, a broad face, and a heavy jowl. Despite his age, he had a commanding presence, and the skills to match. He and Wen Chou battled for 50 or 60 bouts, and still no winner emerged. By now, Gongsun Zan's reinforcements finally caught up. Seeing that he's outnumbered, Wen Chou retreated, and the young warrior did not give chase.

Gongsun Zan now hurried down from his perch atop the hill and asked the young man for his name. The young warrior bowed and said, "My name is Zhao Yun. I am from Changshan. I used to serve in Yuan Shao's army, but when I saw that he had no intention to serve his emperor or save the people, I decided to leave him and come join you. But I did not expect to run into you here."

Even though he had a pretty pitiful outing, Gongsun Zan was delighted with his new addition. He took Zhao Yun with him back to his camp, where he reorganized his army. The next day, Gongsun Zan

deployed his army in two divisions, spread out like a pair of wings. In these two divisions, he had some 5,000 horses, most of which were white.

Apparently white horses were kind of Gongsun Zan's calling card. Back in the day, he waged a campaign against the Jiang people, whom the Han considered borderland barbarians. During that campaign, Gongsun Zan used only white horses for his vanguard and called himself General White Horse. He had such great success against the Jiang tribes that they fled whenever they saw white horses coming.

Well, unfortunately for Gongsun Zan, Yuan Shao had no such fear for white horses. He ordered Yan Liang and Wen Chou to head up the vanguard. They each led a thousand archers and formed two lines on the left and right. Their job was to hold the flanks of Gongsun Zan's lines at bay. Yuan Shao then ordered another general, Qu (1) Yi (4), to lead 800 archers and 15,000 infantry and take up position in the center of the formation. Yuan Shao himself led tens of thousands of infantry and cavalry as backup.

On the other side, Gongsun decided to assign his newest acquisition, Zhao Yun, to lead a detachment of men at the rear of the army because Gongsun Zan wasn't quite sure how much he could trust him yet. The vanguard was led by the general Yan (2) Gang (1), while Gongsun Zan himself commanded the main army. Once again, he stood on the bridge over the river. Beside him was an enormous red banner with the words "Commanding General" embroidered in gold.

So the two sides were all lined up and ready to go. The battle drums rolled, and the two armies ... did nothing. The drums rolled some more, and the armies still held their ground. The drums rolled from sunrise to noon, and still neither army made a move toward the other.

Finally, Yan (2) Gang (1) lost his patience and led Gongsun Zan's vanguard forward. But Yuan Shao's troops did not come up to meet them. Instead, Qu (1) Yi (4) ordered the archers on Yuan Shao's side to hide behind shields. As Yan (2) Gang's (1) forces approached, Yuan Shao's men did not move. When Yan (2) Gang (1) got close, the sound of a bomb exploding gave Yuan Shao's soldiers the signal they had

been waiting for. The 800 archers simultaneously rose up and fired.

Met with this barrage of arrows, Yan (2) Gang (1) tried to turn back, but Qu (1) Yi (4) sprinted out and cut him down. Gongsun Zan's army was routed. When his left and right flanks tried to come up to provide reinforcement, the archers led by Yan Liang and Wen Chou got into the action, and their arrows turned back the enemy.

Yuan Shao's army now began to advance, and they charged all the way to the bridge. Qu (1) Yi (4) led the way, and when he got to the bridge, he first killed the flag bearer, and then cut down Gongsun Zan's giant banner. Gongsun Zan, sensing that things were getting ugly, did what he seemed to be best at -- turning and fleeing.

Qu (1) Yi (4) and his men charged all the way to the rear of Gongsun Zan's army, but remember who was stationed there. Qu (1) Yi (4) ran smack dab into Zhao Yun, and after just a few bouts, Zhao Yun stabbed Qu (1) Yi (4) with his spear and killed him. Zhao Yun then rode into Yuan Shao's army alone and everywhere he went, the resistance melted away. Seeing the momentum turning, Gongsun Zan directed his army to charge back, and they sent Yuan Shao's soldiers scurrying back in the other direction.

Meanwhile, back on the other side of the bridge, Yuan Shao had sent scouts to check on the progress of the battle. The first scouts reported back that Qu (1) Yi (4) had killed an enemy general, cut down the enemy's main banner, and was chasing Gongsun Zan's defeated army. This report made Yuan Shao drop his guard, and he rode forward with Tian (2) Feng (1), one of his advisers, along with a few hundred personal guards and a few dozen archers. Surveying the battlefield, Yuan Shao laughed.

"Gongsun Zan really is inept."

But even as he was speaking those words, Zhao Yun had stormed into his traveling party. Before the archers could even fire a single shot, Zhao Yun had already killed a number of them. The rest turned and ran, and Gongsun Zan's army, following Zhao Yun's charge, now came up and surrounded Yuan Shao's entourage.

“My lord, you should hide between those two walls!” Tian (2) Feng (1) said to Yuan Shao.

However, Yuan Shao threw his helmet on the ground and cried, “A true man would rather face death in battle than to pray for life behind a wall!”

So here, we get a glimpse at another side of Yuan Shao. We’ve certainly given him a lot of flack so far for being indecisive and more concerned with appearances than substance. But when the going gets tough, we can see that he’s not one to shy away from a fight. Fueled by their commander’s courage, Yuan Shao’s men put up a dogged fight, and kept Zhao Yun from breaking into their circle. A short while later, the main body of Yuan Shao’s army arrived, as did the vanguard under the command of his general Yan (2) Liang (2).

This pincer attack turned the tide, and Gongsun Zan had to run away yet again, this time with Zhao Yun protecting him. They fought their way out of the scrum and returned to the bridge. Yuan Shao ordered his men to charge back across the bridge, and countless men in Gongsun Zan’s army fell into the river and drowned as they tried to flee.

Yuan Shao kept up the pursuit, riding at the front of his army. But he hadn’t gone but two miles when loud shouts rose up from behind a hill, and a squad of soldiers darted out. At the head of this army were three warriors -- Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei. The three of them were stationed at Pingyuan (2,2) County, and when they heard that Gongsun Zan had set off to war against Yuan Shao, they came to give Gongsun Zan a hand.

And now, the three brothers, all wielding their weapons, galloped toward Yuan Shao. Yuan Shao knew full well how formidable these guys were, and the sight of them charging right at him scared him so much that he dropped his knife and turned and ran. His entourage put up a desperate fight and barely escorted him back across the bridge.

Gongsun Zan decided to call it a day while he was on the winning side of this seesaw battle. He led his army back to camp and greeted the three brothers. “If you hadn’t come to rescue me,” he said to Liu



Bei, “this would’ve been a humiliating day.”

He then called Zhao Yun over and introduced him to Liu Bei. These two hit it off instantly, and both were soon dreading the day when they would have to take leave of each other. We’ll have more on this bromance later.

Meanwhile, Yuan Shao, after losing the first battle, decided to just stay in his camp and not come out to fight. The two armies faced each other for more than a month without any further combat. Word of this stalemate soon reached Dong Zhuo in the new capital of Changan (2,1). His adviser, Li (3) Ru (2), offered a suggestion.

“Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan are both considered great men of the times,” Li (3) Ru (2) said. “Right now they’re fighting each other at the River Pan (2). My lord, you can send a decree in the name of the emperor and make peace between them. They will both be thankful and turn their allegiance to you.”

Dong Zhuo did as Li Ru suggested and sent two court officials to carry out this errand. The two arrived on the north bank of the river, where Yuan Shao came out to greet them some 30 miles away from his camp and bowed again and again to the imperial decree. The next day, the peacemakers went to Gongsun Zan’s camp and read the decree out loud. Gongsun Zan and Yuan Shao, both of whom were probably looking for a face-saving way to extract themselves from this stalemate, then wrote to each other and worked out a truce.

Their job done, the two peacemakers returned to the capital, while Gongsun Zan prepared to return home. Before he took off, he wrote to the emperor and recommended Liu Bei for the post of governor of Pingyuan. So Liu Bei kept rising in rank, but he just couldn’t seem to get away from Pingyuan County and onto greener pastures.

As Liu Bei prepared to take his leave, he and Zhao Yun had a touching goodbye as they held each other’s hands and wept at having to part from one another.

“[Sigh] I used to think Gongsun Zan was a hero,” Zhao Yun sighed. “But now I see that he’s just the

same as Yuan Shao and all the rest.”

“Tough it out for the time being,” Liu Bei said. “We will surely meet again.”

With that, they bid a teary goodbye to each other and went their separate ways.

So that takes care of the battle between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan. Yuan Shao got to keep Ji (4) Province, which was the thing that started the conflict in the first place. But he soon had somebody else knocking on his door looking to get a piece of the pie. His cousin, Yuan Shu, was setting up his base of power in Nanyang (2,2) Prefecture. When he heard that Yuan Shao had grabbed control of Ji (4) Province, he sent a messenger to go ask his cousin for a thousand horses. But Yuan Shao refused, and that caused a rift between the two.

Rebuffed by his own cousin, Yuan Shu next sent a message to Jing (1) Province, asking Liu Biao to lend him 200,000 bushels of grain, but Liu Biao was also not in a charitable mood. Denied again, Yuan Shu now held a grudge against Liu Biao, so he sent a secret message to Sun Jian and suggested that he should attack Liu Biao. The secret message said,

“Before, when Liu Biao attacked you on your way home, he was acting on the orders of my cousin Yuan Shao. And now Yuan Shao and Liu Biao are talking about taking the Jiangdong (1,1) region. You should attack Liu Biao now, while I keep Yuan Shao at bay for you. This way, you can get revenge on both of them. You can have Jing (1) Province, while I take Ji (4) Province. Don’t miss this golden opportunity.”

A quick note on some geographical terminology here: The word Jiangdong (1,1) literally means east of the river. In this case, the river refers to the Yangzi (2,3) River. In translations of the novel, you will also see this region referred to as the South Lands.

Ok, that concludes our geography lesson. Back to Yuan Shu’s attempt to talk Sun Jian into attacking Liu Biao. As you might remember, Sun Jian and Yuan Shu weren’t exactly buddies. After all, Yuan Shu was the one who withheld provisions from Sun Jian’s army and contributed to a defeat against the forces of

Dong Zhuo. But now, having received Yuan Shu's secret message, Sun Jian seemed willing to let bygones be bygones in the name of revenge.

"I have not forgotten or forgiven Liu Biao for cutting off my path home. If I do not seek revenge now, how long must I wait?" he said. So he gathered his three top commanders -- Cheng Pu, Huang Gai, and Han Dang -- to discuss how to proceed.

"Yuan Shu is full of deceit. You cannot trust him," Cheng Pu advised.

"I'm the one who's after revenge. I don't need any help from Yuan Shu," Sun Jian replied, and that was that. He sent Huang Gai to go prepare warships, weapons, provisions, and large transport ships for carrying war horses, and the army was to set out in a few days.

Word of this quickly got back to Liu Biao, who hastily gathered his advisers. One of his most trusted advisers, Kuai (3) Liang (2), tried to put his mind at ease.

"There is no need to worry," he said. "Sun Jian is traveling a great distance, riding the river and straddling the lakes along the way. What strength will he have left when he gets here? You can order commander Huang (2) Zu (3) to lead the army stationed at Jiangxia (1,4) to be the vanguard, and then you can lead the forces from the province to back him up."

Liu Biao did as Kuai (3) Liang (2) suggested and ordered Huang (2) Zu (3) and the forces of Jing (1) Province to prepare for battle.

We now jump back across the river, where Sun Jian was about to set off on his campaign. As he prepared to disembark, his younger brother, Sun Jing (4), came to see him off. He was accompanied by Sun Jian's whole family, which included two wives who were sisters, six sons, and a daughter.

Sun Jing (4) now bowed before Sun Jian's horse and tried to talk him out of going to war.

"Right now, Dong Zhuo controls the state, the emperor is weak, the empire is in chaos, and everyone is trying to stake a claim to their little patch of turf," Sun Jing (4) said. "Jiangdong (1,1) has just been pacified. It's not good to go to war over a little bad blood."

“Brother, say no more,” Sun Jian replied. “If I am to make a name for myself in the empire, how can I allow this wrong to go unavenged?”

At this point, Sun Jian’s oldest son, Sun Ce (4), spoke up.

“Father, if you intend to go to war, I am willing to go with you.”

Sun Jian agreed to this, and so he and Sun Ce boarded their ship and their army made for the city of Fancheng (2,2). When they arrived, they saw that Liu Biao’s vanguard, led by Huang (2) Zu (3), was waiting. Huang (2) Zu (3) had set up archers along the river bank, and whenever they saw a ship come near the shore, they would fire a barrage of arrows.

Sun Jian had an answer to this. He ordered his men to not make any rash moves. Instead, they all laid sheltered within their ships while moving their ships near shore to lure the archers into firing. In a span of three days, Sun Jian’s ships went near shore more than a dozen times, and each time, Huang (2) Zu’s (3) archers showered them with arrows. After three days, the archers had exhausted their supply of arrows. Sun Jian now ordered his men to collect the arrows that had struck their ships. They ended up with more than 100,000 arrows. The next day, with the wind behind them, Sun Jian ordered his soldiers to fire the arrows back at Huang (2) Zu’s (3) army, which could not withstand this siege and had to fall back.

With no one on shore to stop them, Sun Jian and his army easily landed. Cheng Pu and Huang Gai each led a force and made straight for Huang (2) Zu’s (3) camp, while Han (2) Dang (1) directed the main body of the army behind them. This three-pronged attack routed Huang (2) Zu (3), and he had to abandon Fancheng (2,2) and retreated to Dengcheng (4,2) to make his stand.

Leaving Huang Gai behind to guard the ships, Sun Jian led his army in pursuit. When they arrived at Dengcheng (4,2), Huang (2) Zu (3) led his forces out to meet them. The two sides lined up across from each other. Sun Jian rode out to under his banner, with his son, Sun Ce (4), by his side, clad in full armor and holding a spear.

On the other side, Huang (2) Zu (3) came out with two officers. One was named Zhang (1) Hu (3), the

other Chen (2) Sheng (1). Huang (2) Zu (3) now waved his whip and cursed Sun Jian.

“You scoundrels from Jiangdong! How dare you trespass on the territory of a relative of the imperial house?!”

He then ordered Zhang (1) Hu (3) to go out and challenge for combat. Within Sun Jian’s ranks, Han Dang rode out to answer the challenge. After about 20 bouts, Zhang (1) Hu (3) was starting to tire. Seeing his fellow officer in trouble, Chen (2) Sheng (1) rode out to help him. But just then, Sun Ce let fly an arrow that struck Chen (2) Sheng (1) right in his face, killing him and sending him tumbling off his horse. The sight of his comrade hitting the ground startled Zhang (1) Hu (3) for just a second, and that was all the time Han Dang needed to shave off a few inches from his head.

With two enemy officers dead, Cheng Pu now galloped out to capture Huang (2) Zu (3). Huang Zu was so scared that he tossed his helmet and even abandoned his horse, hiding among his foot soldiers as they fled. Sun Jian ordered his men forward, and they pursued all the way to the Han (4) River, where they held up temporarily while Sun Jian ordered Huang Gai to move the fleet upriver.

Since we left Sun Jian in a pickle at the end of the last episode, it seems only fair that we end this episode with him on top. We will pick it up there and cover the rest of his quest of vengeance on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.