

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast. This is episode 13.

Last time, Wang Yun managed to kill Dong Zhuo, but was soon killed himself by Dong Zhuo's generals led by Li Jue and Guo Si, who then seized power in the capital and kept the emperor as their puppet, much as Dong Zhuo had done. This prompted Ma Teng, the governor of Xiliang, and Han (2) Sui (4), the imperial protector of Bing (1) Province, to join forces and march on the capital. Jia (3) Xu (3), an adviser to Li Jue and company, had suggested that they simply stay behind the city's walls and wait until the enemy run out of provisions, at which point it would be forced to retreat.

But Li (3) Meng (2) and Wang (2) Fang (1), two of Li Jue's officers, were aching for a fight, and they convinced Li Jue to give the 15,000 men to go take on Ma Teng's army. And so off they went. When they met Ma Teng's forces, both sides lined up in battle formation, and Ma Teng and Han Sui rode out. They pointed at Li Meng and Wang Fang and cursed them.

"Who wants to go capture these traitors?" they asked.

Before they were done talking, a young general darted out from Ma Teng's lines. His face bore the complexion of flawless jade. His eyes were like shooting stars. He had a lithe yet powerful build. He wielded a long spear and rode a fine steed. This youngster's name was Ma Chao, and he was Ma Teng's eldest son. Even though he was just 17, he was a peerless warrior.

But Wang Fang had not read the scouting report. When he saw such a young challenger, he scoffed and rode out to meet Ma Chao. But within just a few bouts, Ma Chao ran his spear through Wang Fang and killed him. Ma Chao then turned and rode away, while Li Meng, seeing his comrade dead, came after Ma Chao from behind. As he gave chase, Ma Chao lackadaisically trotted back toward his own lines. Ma Teng, seeing his son seemingly unaware, cried out for him to look behind him. But before Ma Teng had even finished speaking, Ma Chao had already captured Li Meng alive.

It turns out that Ma Chao knew full well that Li Meng was coming after him the whole time and was dallying only to lure him in. Once Li Meng got close and tried to stab Ma Chao with his spear, Ma Chao

easily dodged the thrust, and as their two horses were running parallel, Ma Chao reached over and yanked Li Meng off his horse. Ma Chao then and his prisoner across his own saddle and rode back to his own lines.

Seeing one of their leaders killed and the other captured, the men that Li Meng and Wang Fang had led out turned and fled. Ma Teng and Han Sui gave chase and scored a big victory. They advanced all the way to one of the passes outside the capital and set up camp there. Ma Teng then had Li Meng beheaded, saving him the trouble of offering up his head to Jia (3) Xu (3), as Li Meng had sworn to do if he lost.

When word of the outcome of this battle got back to Li Jue and Guo Si, Jia (3) Xu (3) got to do a little "I told you so", and the two generals now recognized his wisdom and decided to take up his suggestion of only fortifying their defenses and not going out to fight. And exactly as Jia Xu had predicted, after a couple months, the army from Xiliang had run out of provisions, and the leaders were talking about calling off the incursion.

At the same time, Ma Teng's three collaborators within the city were exposed by one of their servants. Not surprisingly, when Li Jue and Guo Si found out, they quickly had the three men and their entire families executed in public, and sent the three men's heads to the front gates of the city for public display.

This setback convinced Ma Teng and Han Sui that it was time to go home. So they ordered their armies to retreat. This was the opportunity Li Jue and Guo Si had been waiting for. They ordered their two comrades, Zhang Ji and Fan Chou, to each lead an army in pursuit, and the result was a total rout of the Xiling forces. Zhang Ji chased after Ma Teng, and it took Ma Chao's valiant efforts to fight him off. Meanwhile, Fan Chou was chasing Han Sui and closing in fast.

As it turns out, Fan Chou and Han Sui were from the same hometown. So when Fan Chou was about to

catch up, Han Sui turned around and tried to talk his way out of this pickle.

“Sir, you and I are from the same town. Why are you pressing me so hard?” Han Sui said.

Upon this, Fan Chou pulled up his horse and said, “I’m simply following orders.”

“And I am merely acting out of concern for the country,” Han Sui countered. “Why must you press me so?”

These words had the intended effect, and Fan Chou turned around and led his men back to camp, allowing Han Sui to escape. But this would come back to haunt Fan Chou. Li Jue’s nephew witnessed the whole thing and told his uncle about how Fan Chou allowed Han Sui to escape. Li Jue was not amused, to put it mildly, and he was ready to take his army and go attack Fan Chou. However, Jia Xu had a better idea.

“Right now people are still unsettled,” Jia Xu said. “If we start fighting, it will cause a lot of headaches. Instead, it will be much easier if you invite Zhang Ji and Fan Chou to a banquet to celebrate their victory, and use that opportunity to kill them.”

Li Jue did as Jia Xu suggested, and Zhang Ji and Fan Chou both came to the victory celebration. In the middle of the feast, Li Jue suddenly changed his tone.

“Fan Chou, why did you collaborate with Han Sui and tried to rebel?” he asked.

Fan Chou was caught off-guard, and before he could muster an answer, armed guards stormed out and swiftly chopped off his head. Zhang Ji was scared witless and threw himself on the ground at Li Jue’s mercy, but Li Jue helped him and said,

“I executed Fan Chou because he was trying to betray us. I know that your heart is true, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Li Jue then put Fan Chou’s forces under Zhang Ji’s command, and Zhang Ji, counting his lucky stars, returned to his base.

After Li Jue and Guo Si turned away the army from Xiliang, all the other warlords were cowed into submission. Meanwhile, Jia Xu, who seemed to be a conscientious official even though he was in the employ of less-than-savory characters, persistently advised his masters to use men of talent and do something nice for the commoners too. As a result, the court began to show some sign of life.

But you knew that the good times, or slightly less bad times, weren't going to last. Soon, an old menace cropped up in Qing (1) Province. Another Yellow Turban rebellion broke out, as hundreds of thousands of people gathered under the leadership of countless chieftains and began looting and pillaging.

As Li Jue and Guo Si tried to figure out how to respond, Zhu Jun, the court steward, told them that there was only one man for the job -- Cao Cao.

"Cao Cao is currently the governor of Dongjun (1,4) and has a large army," Zhu Jun said. "If you order him to take on the rebels, he will put them down in no time."

Li Jue agreed and sent a messenger with a decree to see Cao Cao. And this finally gives us a chance to get out of Changan and see what's going on in the provinces after spending the last few episodes in the capital. So in Dongjun (1,4), Cao Cao received the imperial decree that he was to join forces with Bao (1) Xin (4), the Lord of Jibei (4,3), and pacify the rebels. So the two of them mobilized their forces and engaged the rebels at Shouyang (4,2).

During the battle, Bao (1) Xin (4) charged into the thick of the action and ended up getting himself killed. But things went much smoother for Cao Cao, who chased the rebels all the way to Jibei (4,3), where tens of thousands of rebels surrendered to him. He then used these men as his vanguard, and wherever they went, they convinced the rebels they encountered to surrender as well. After only 100-some days, Cao Cao had accepted the surrender of more than 300,000 rebel troops, along with more than a million noncombatants. From the newly surrendered troops, Cao Cao selected the most seasoned soldiers and organized them into what became known as the Army of Qing Province. As for the

rest, he released them from service and sent them all back home to their farms.

This swift and decisive victory catapulted Cao Cao to fame and prestige, and when the report of his victory reached the capital, the court gave him a fat promotion. Putting his newfound fame to good use, Cao Cao set up base in Yan (3) Province and began recruiting talented men to bolster his ranks. And this is when he really began to build the corps of advisers and warriors who will serve him capably in the years ahead. And as much as I hate to throw strings of names at you, I have to do it here to introduce the guys whom we'll be mentioning for quite a while as we go forward. If you have trouble keeping up, refer to the characters chart for this episode on the website.

Among the advisers who flocked to his banner were an uncle-and-nephew duo. The uncle was named Xun (2) Yu (4). He used to serve Yuan Shao but now decided that Cao Cao was a worthier master. After conversing with Xun (2) Yu (4), Cao Cao was so delighted that he called him “my Zhang (1) Liang (2)” and named him military counselor.

Ok, so who is Zhang Liang? He was an adviser to the first emperor of the Han Dynasty and was instrumental in the founding of the dynasty. When people of antiquity talked about great advisers, they always talked about two people in particular as the greatest of the greats. One was Jiangzi (1,3) Ya (2), who helped found the Zhou dynasty that lasted some 800 years. And the other was Zhang Liang, who helped found the Han dynasty that will last 400 years. To this day, Zhang Liang is always up there in the top five when people talk about greatest strategists in Chinese history. So to be compared with Zhang Liang is a special honor, albeit a blatant hyperbole.

Xun (2) Yu (4) was accompanied by his nephew, Xun (2) You (1), who was a renowned scholar in his own right. He used to serve as an attendant in the Inner Bureau at the palace back when the Han court was still in Luoyang. But he later gave up his post and returned home before things really got bad. And now, Cao Cao named him a military instructional supervisor.

Xun (2) Yu (4) then recommended a local talent to Cao Cao, a man named Cheng (2) Yu (4). Cao Cao

sent people out to look for this guy and, living up to the secluded ancient Chinese scholar cliché, they found him living on a mountain and dedicating himself to his scholarly pursuits. Upon receiving an invitation from Cao Cao, Cheng (2) Yu (4) went to see him, which made Cao Cao very happy.

After the requisite show of self-effacing humility, Cheng (2) Yu (4) then recommended one of his acquaintances, a man named Guo (1) Jia (1). At the mention of his name, Xun (2) Yu (4) said, “Of course! How could I have forgotten about him?!” You’ll notice that all these scholars hung out together at one point or another. And so Cao Cao invited Guo (1) Jia (1) to come to Yan (3) Province to discuss state affairs.

And won’t you know it, Guo (1) Jia (1) recommended one of his study buddies, Liu (2) Ye (4), a descendant of the first emperor of the Eastern Han dynasty. And Cao Cao said, sure, why not, the more the merrier. And guess what happened next? That’s right. Liu (2) Ye (4) then recommended two of his friends, Man (3) Chong (3) and Lü (3) Qian (2). Cao Cao had heard of these two guys before as well, and as long as he was giving everybody’s friend a job, he brought these two onboard as well. And these two, of course, recommended another guy by the name of Mao (2) Jie (4), whom Cao Cao also hired as a military aide.

So now that everyone in this pre-digital LinkedIn network and mutual-admiration society is on Cao Cao’s payroll, let’s turn our attention to the guys who will do the actual fighting. Cao Cao did pretty well on this front, too. First, a general named Yu (1) Jin (4) came at the head of several hundred men to offer his services. Seeing that Yu Jin was a skilled archer and warrior, Cao Cao named him captain of the roll.

Later, one of Cao Cao’s generals, Xiahou Dun, brought a big man to see him.

“His name is Dian (3) Wei (2), and he has superhuman strength,” Xiahou Dun said. “He used to serve Zhang Miao (3), the governor of Chenliu Prefecture. He got into a fight with some of Zhang Miao’s other followers, and he ended up killing a few dozen men with his bare hands and then fled into the hills. I was

out hunting one day and saw him chasing a tiger across a stream, so I recruited him and kept him in my troops, and now I present his services to you, my lord.”

“He is a colossus!” Cao Cao said.

“He once killed a man to settle a score for a friend,” Xiahou Dun said. “He then walked through town with the head in tow, and no one among the hundreds of people who witnessed it dared to approach him. His weapon of choice are two steel halberds that weigh more than a hundred pounds. When he’s on a horse, he wields them like the wind.”

Well, Dian (3) Wei (2) would probably never pass a background check, what with the whole killing-dozens-of-your-coworkers thing and the carrying-a-man’s-head-through-the-streets thing. But Cao Cao was sufficiently impressed by the description of his strength, and he ordered Dian (3) Wei (2) to put on a demonstration. So Dian (3) Wei (2) got on his horse, grabbed his weapon, and dashed back and forth. Just then, the main flag in camp was being blown around by a strong gust of wind and was teetering on the brink of falling over. A bunch of soldiers tried to steady it, but could not because it was so heavy. Dian (3) Wei (2) dismounted, shooed away these puny mortals, and grabbed the flag pole with one hand. Immediately, the flag pole stood straight up in the wind and did not budge.

“He is the second coming of E (4) Lai (2)!” Cao Cao exclaimed, comparing Dian (3) Wei (2) to a legendary bodyguard for the last king of the Shang Dynasty from the 11th century BC. Thoroughly impressed, Cao Cao made Dian (3) Wei (2) his personal bodyguard, literally gave him the coat off his back, as well as a fine horse with a fancy saddle.

So thanks to this influx of well-connected brain and man-beast brawn, Cao Cao now boasted an impressive corps of civil officials and warriors, and his influence spread across the region. Seeing his position secure, he figured it was time to bring his father to Yan (3) Province, so he sent Ying (4) Shao (4), the governor of Taishan (4,1), to fetch his family.

As some of you may remember, Cao Cao's dad, Cao Song (1), had fled to Chenliu Prefecture and gone into hiding when Cao Cao went on the run after his failed assassination attempt against Dong Zhuo. And now Cao Song (1) got a letter from his son saying come live the high life with me at Yan (3) Province. So Cao Song (1) and his younger brother Cao De (2), along with their 40-some family members and 100-some attendants, packed up their belongings into more than 100 carts and set off.

Along the way, they passed by Xu (2) Province. The imperial inspector there, Tao (2) Qian (1), is a warm and sincere man. He had always wanted to strike up a connection with Cao Cao but hadn't had the opportunity to do so. When he heard that Cao Cao's dad was passing through, he immediately went out of his way to go greet him at the border, showed him great deference, and feasted with him for two days. When Cao Song was about to depart, Tao (2) Qian (1) personally saw him out of the city and ordered one of his own officers, Zhang (1) Kai (3), to lead 500 soldiers to protect Cao Song and his entourage.

It was around the start of autumn, and after Cao Song's entourage had been on the road for a while, they were caught up in a torrential downpour, so they had to seek shelter for the night in an old monastery. The resident monk took them in. After Cao Song got his family settled into quarters, he ordered that Zhang (1) Kai (3) and his soldiers to sleep in the corridors. Well, these grunts were all soaked from the rain, and they started grumbling. Soon the grumbings got louder and took a murderous turn as Zhang Kai (3) spoke with his lieutenants in private.

"We used to be members of the yellow turban uprising, and we only surrendered to Tao (2) Qian (1) because we had no choice," he said. "We haven't gotten squat from Tao (2) Qian (1). But now we've got all this wealth from Cao Song's carts in the palm of our hands. Tonight, let's storm in there, kill Cao Song and his family, take their stuff, and go start anew as bandits."

Everyone agreed to this plan. That night, with rain and wind still swirling, Cao Song was sitting in his quarters when suddenly he heard shouts coming from all directions. His brother Cao De (2) pulled out his



sword and went outside to take a look. He had barely set foot outside before he was stabbed to death. Cao Song and one of his concubines ran for cover behind the monk's quarters. They tried to climb over the outer wall to escape, but his concubine was too fat and couldn't get herself over the wall. In a panic, Cao Song and his concubine tried to hid in the bathroom, but that was a pretty pitiful attempt at hiding, since the bathroom is probably the first place anyone would look. And so they were both discovered and cut down. Zhang Kai (3) and company proceeded to slaughter everyone in Cao Song's family, took their stuff, set the monastery on fire, and fled with his 500 men.

Someone later wrote a poem about this carnage:

Cao Cao in all his vaunted cunning,  
Slew his hosts and kept on running.  
Now that his whole clan's been slain,  
The scales of Heaven are level again.

Now this is a reference to Cao Cao killing his father's sworn brother Lü Boshe and his family earlier in the story. So in other words, what goes around, comes around.

One of the few survivors of the massacre was Ying (4) Shao (4), the man that Cao Cao had sent to fetch his family. He managed to fight his way to safety, but he knew there was no way he could go back to Cao Cao with this news. So he ended up seeking refuge with Yuan Shao. But some of the men under Ying (4) Shao's (4) command also managed to escape, and they did run back to Cao Cao. When he heard the bad news, Cao Cao crumbled to the ground and cried bitterly. When his men helped him up, Cao Cao said, through gritted teeth, "That Tao (2) Qian (1) allowed his men to kill my father. This shall not stand! I'm going to mobilize my army and wash his province with blood to soothe my anger!"

So Cao Cao left two advisers, Xun (2) Yu (4) and Cheng (2) Yu (4), along with 30,000 men, to guard the three counties that made up his base of power, and pointed the rest of his army toward Xu (2) Province. He appointed Xiahou Dun, Yu Jin, and Dian (2) Wei (3) to lead the vanguard, with the order that whenever they sack a city, they must slaughter everyone in the city to avenge his father. So yeah, just a slight overreaction there, but hey, who's going to argue with the guy who has the giant army and a bunch of kick-ass warriors at his command?

But people did try. First, Bian (1) Rang (4), the governor of Jiujiang (3,1), was a good friend of Tao Qian's. When he heard what Cao Cao was up to, he led a force of 5,000 to the aid of Xu Province. When Cao Cao got wind of this, though, he flew into a rage and had Xiahou Dun ambush Bian (1) Rang (4) on the way and kill him. Let that be a lesson to the rest of you.

Then, another man tried to stop Cao Cao, but with words instead of force. Remember Chen Gong, the county magistrate who had Cao Cao in his custody years ago and let him go? Well, after seeing Cao Cao's unrepentant attitude after he had killed his father's sworn brother, Chen Gong ditched him and tried to make his way elsewhere. At this point, he was serving as an official in Dongjun (1,4) and had become good friends with Tao Qian. When he heard that Cao Cao had mobilized his army and intended to slaughter everyone in Xu Province, Chen Gong made with all haste to seek an audience with Cao Cao.

Cao Cao knew what Chen Gong was here about, and he didn't really want to see him. But then again, considering the huge favor that Chen Gong did for him, i.e., spare his life, Cao Cao couldn't very well turn him away, so he invited Chen Gong into his tent.

"Good sir, I heard that you are leading a huge army toward Xu Province to avenge your father and that you intend to slaughter everyone along the way," Chen Gong said. "I have come to offer you a piece of advice. Tao Qian is an honorable man, not the greedy sort. The death of your father rests squarely on the head of Zhang Kai (3), not Tao Qian. Furthermore, what have the common people of this region done

to you? It would be bad karma to kill them. I hope you will reconsider.”

Cao Cao got mad at these words.

“You abandoned me before. Have you no shame in coming back to face me now? Tao Qian killed my whole family. I swear I will cut out his heart to satisfy my hatred. I will not be swayed by your words!”

Thus rebuffed, Chen Gong could do little but to take his leave. When he left Cao Cao’s camp, he sighed. “[sigh] I can’t go face Tao Qian either now.” And so he rode off to Chenliu Prefecture to serve the governor there instead.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao’s army marched forward, and good to his word, everywhere they went, they not only slaughtered the living, but also desecrated the dead by digging open their graves. When Tao Qian heard about this, he looked up at the heavens and wept, “I must have offended heaven somehow to have brought such calamity upon the people of Xu Province!” He then assembled all his officials to discuss what to do.

One of his officers, Cao Pao (4), no relation to Cao Cao, suggested they go down fighting. “Cao Cao’s army is almost here,” he said. “How can we just sit around and wait for death? I am willing to help you defeat him.”

Well, these words didn’t exactly fill Tao Qian with confidence, but then again, he really had no choice. So when Cao Cao’s army came to the city, Tao Qian led his forces out to meet them. In the distance, Tao Qian could see that Cao Cao’s army was all clad in white armor. In the center of the army stood two giant white banners bearing the words “Revenge”.

Once the two armies had lined up in battle formation, Cao Cao galloped to the front line, all dressed in white mourning clothes, and started cursing Tao Qian. Tao Qian also rode out to under his own banner, where he bowed and said, “My lord, my intention was to seek your friendship. That’s why I sent Zhang Kai (3) to escort your family. But who knew that rebel would revert to his old ways and cause all this

trouble. It really had nothing to do with me. Please, I pray you, look at the facts.”

But Cao Cao hadn't come all this way, killed all those people, and dug up all those graves just to be swayed now by insignificant things like facts and reason. “You old scoundrel!” he barked back at Tao Qian. “You killed my father. How dare you now speak such nonsense?! Who will go capture him for me?”

Xiahou Dun rode out as soon as he heard this. Tao Qian quickly ran back into his own formation, and when Xiahou Dun charged forward, Cao Pao rode out to meet him. Just as they were about to face off, however, a huge wind suddenly swept in. With sand and stones swirling, both sides fell into chaos, so they both fell back, Cao Cao back to his camp, and Tao Qian back inside the city.

Even though he was granted a stay of execution by mother nature, Tao Qian knew he was still in deep trouble. He told his officials, “Cao Cao's army is too much to resist. I will have myself bound and go to his camp and let him do to me whatever he wills, so as to save the lives of all the people in the city.”

But one of his officials stepped forward and said, “My lord, you have been overseeing Xu Province for a long time, and the people are better off for it. Cao Cao's army may be large, but they cannot breach our city quickly. You and the people of the city should defend and refuse to go out to fight him. Meanwhile, I have a plan that will spell doom for Cao Cao.”

Everyone was surprised to hear such boasting and turned to see who it was that had spoken so confidently. It was a man named Mi (2) Zhu (2).

There's an interesting backstory about Mi (2) Zhu (2). He came from a wealthy family, and he often went to the old capital Luoyang to do business. One day, as he was riding in his carriage back home from Luoyang, he came across a beautiful woman who asked for a ride. Being an honorable and proper man, Mi (2) Zhu (2) let her sit in the carriage while he walked alongside it. After a while, the woman asked him to sit in the carriage as well. So Mi (2) Zhu (2) got back on and sat down next to her. But the whole time, he kept his eyes pointed straight ahead and never stole a sideways glance at his beautiful traveling companion.

After a few miles, the woman took her leave. Before she left, though, she told Mi (2) Zhu (2), “I am the deity of solar fire. I have been sent by the supreme god to burn your house. But because you treated me with such commendable propriety, I want to give you some advance warning. Go home quickly and move all your valuables out of the house. I will arrive tonight.”

After this, the woman vanished into thin air. Mi (2) Zhu (2) was stunned and hurried home to move all his belongings out of the house. And sure enough, that night, a fire started in his kitchen and consumed the rest of the house. After this episode, Mi (2) Zhu (2) began directing his wealth to charity, and later, Tao Qian hired him as an aide.

So what was this plan that Mi (2) Zhu (2) says will spell doom for Cao Cao?

“I am willing to personally go to Beihai (2,3) Prefecture and beg the governor there, Kong Rong, to mobilize his army and come to your aid,” Mi (2) Zhu (2) said. “At the same time, if someone can go to Qing (1) Province and request aid from Tian (2) Kai (3), then with these two forces combined, Cao Cao will definitely have to retreat.”

Tao Qian figured it couldn't hurt to give it a shot. So he wrote two letters and gave one to Mi (2) Zhu (2) to take to Beihai (2,3). Tao Qian then asked if anyone dared to go to Qing Province for help. One man, named Chen (2) Deng (1) volunteered immediately. So Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Chen (2) Deng (1) set out for their respective destinations, while Tao Qian fortified his defenses in anticipation of a siege.

To see if Tao Qian could get anyone to come to his aid in time, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.