

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 37.

Last time, we left off on the cusp of one of the defining military campaigns of the novel. Cao Cao and Yuan Shao were about to go at each other near the Yellow River with everything they've got. Yuan Shao had marched 700,000 troops to the front lines, and they had set up camps that ran for some 30 miles.

When scouts reported this intel to Cao Cao, he and his meager army of 70,000 had just arrived at the key river crossing of Guandu (1,4). When they heard about the size of the enemy, Cao Cao's men were feeling just a little intimidated, and Cao Cao met with his advisers to discuss how to proceed.

"Yuan Shao's army may be immense, but there is no need to fear," said one of the strategists, Xun (2) You (1). "Each of our soldiers is the equal of 10 of theirs. But it's in our interest to fight quickly. If this campaign gets dragged out, our provisions will run low and it will become problematic."

"My thoughts exactly," Cao Cao said.

So he ordered his army to beat the battle drums and advance on the enemy. Yuan Shao led his army out to meet them, and the two sides lined up in battle formation.

On Yuan Shao's side, his adviser Shen (3) Pei (4) put 5,000 men with crossbows on each wing of his formation, with another 5,000 archers hidden out of view near the front entrance to the formation.

After three rounds of drums, Yuan Shao rode out to the front of the lines, donning a golden helmet and a suit of gold-plated armor, a fine robe, and a studded belt. To his left and right were his generals, led by the likes of Zhang (1) He (2), Gao (1) Lan (3), Han (2) Meng (3), and Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2). And the banners all stood in perfect order.

On Cao Cao's side, the formation opened up, and Cao Cao rode out, surrounded by his top generals. Cao Cao pointed at Yuan Shao with his whip and said, "I had recommended to the emperor to appoint you regent-marshal. Why do you now rebel?"

"You pass yourself off as the prime minister of the Han, but you are in fact a traitor to the Han!" Yuan Shao shot back. "Your crimes mount to the heavens. You are like Wang (2) Mang (3) and Dong (3) Zhuo (2). How dare you accuse someone else of treason?!"

"I have an imperial decree to pacify you!" Cao Cao said.

"I am waging war on the traitor as ordered by the jade girdle decree!" Yuan Shao countered, making a reference to the blood decree the emperor had given to Dong (2) Cheng (3), which resulted in a failed conspiracy a few episodes back.

Well, the whole jade girdle decree thing hit a sore spot for Cao Cao, and he ordered his officer Zhang (1) Liao (2) to go out to pick a fight. On Yuan Shao's side, Zhang (1) He (2) galloped out to answer the challenge. The two warriors dueled for about 50 bouts, with neither gaining the upperhand, and Cao Cao could not help but secretly marvel at Zhang He's skills.

At that point, another of Cao Cao's generals, Xu (2) Chu (3), rode out with saber in hand to help his comrade. But he was met by Gao (1) Lan (3), another of Yuan Shao's top officers. So the four generals went at each other.

Cao Cao now ordered Xiahou Dun and Cao Hong (2) to each lead 3,000 soldiers and storm through Yuan Shao's formation. But as soon as Yuan Shao's strategist Shen (3) Pei (4) caught sight of this, he sounded the alarm, and all the archers he had stationed began firing arrows into the oncoming enemy. There was no way Cao Cao's troops could withstand 15,000 enemy soldiers launching arrows at them, so they hurriedly retreated toward the south. Yuan Shao ordered his troops to pursue, and they chased Cao Cao's army all the way back to their base at Guandu (1,4). Yuan Shao then set up camp basically right on top of Guandu (1,4). So round 1 went to Yuan Shao.

After this initial victory, Yuan Shao's adviser Shen (3) Pei (4) offered up another suggestion.

"We should send 100,000 men to watch Guandu and build up dirt mounds in front of Cao Cao's camp," he said. "That way, our men can shoot arrows down at the enemy. If Cao Cao abandons his camp and leaves, then we will control this critical position, and Xuchang will be ours."

Yuan Shao consented and ordered his best soldiers to go to the edge of Cao Cao's camp and start piling up dirt mounds. When Cao Cao's troops saw this, they tried to charge out and stop them, but were held at bay by Shen Pei's archers.

Within 10 days, Yuan Shao's troops had built 50-some dirt mounds. On top of each one, they erected a watchtower stationed with men armed with crossbows. Now Cao Cao's troops were gripped with fear, and all they could do was to hide behind their shields. Whenever the sound of a wooden clapper rang out as the signal, arrows flew down like rain, and Cao Cao's troops all hit the ground looking for cover, while Yuan Shao's men showered them with laughter and mockery.

Seeing his army in disarray, Cao Cao assembled his advisers to see if anybody had any bright ideas. One of them, Liu (2) Ye (4), suggested they build catapults to counter. Cao Cao agreed, and over the next few nights, they built hundreds of catapults and stationed them along the walls of camp, pointed straight at the watchtowers on the dirt mounds.

The next time Yuan Shao's men started to fire arrows, Cao Cao's troops responded by launching giant rocks with their catapults, smashing into the watchtowers. Now it was Yuan Shao's men's turn to duck and cover, except the archers on the watchtowers had nowhere to hide, and countless were killed in this assault. After this, Yuan Shao's men all referred to the catapults as "thunder machines."

With the dirt mound idea having gone bust, Shen Pei offered up another idea for Yuan Shao. They ordered soldiers to start secretly digging a tunnel that would take them directly into Cao Cao's camp. But Cao Cao's troops spotted Yuan Shao's men digging behind the dirt mounds. When Cao Cao heard about this, he asked Liu Ye (4), and Liu Ye said:

"Yuan Shao's troops cannot take us head on, so they are trying to stage a surprise attack by tunneling into our camp."

"How do we counter?" Cao Cao asked.

"Dig a trench around our camp, and that will render their tunnel useless," Liu Ye said.

Cao Cao ordered his men to dig the trench immediately, and sure enough, when Yuan Shao's soldiers got to the trench, they could go no further, and all their efforts were for naught.

So after their initial battle, the two sides settled into this stalemate where they matched wits and held each other at bay for more than a month. The campaign started in August, and it was now the end of September. Cao Cao was running out of provisions, and he started entertaining thoughts of abandoning Guandu and retreating to the capital, but could not make up his mind. So he dispatched a message to Xuchang, asking his top adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) for his thoughts.

Xun Yu wrote back and said, "I have received your esteemed letter instructing me to help you decide whether to retreat. In my unworthy opinion, Yuan Shao has concentrated his forces at Guandu to fight a decisive battle against your excellency. You have gone up against a stronger enemy with the weaker force. If you cannot dominate them, then prepare to be dominated by them. This is a fateful moment for the empire. Even though Yuan Shao has superior numbers, he does not know how to use his troops well, whereas your excellency's superb mastery of warfare and clear judgment shall carry the day, regardless of circumstances. Even though you have the smaller army, you are still in better shape than the Supreme Ancestor when he fought against his rival for control of the empire. You have

held your ground and stymied the enemy's advance. This is a critical moment and a turning point. You cannot miss this opportunity to make an ingenious move. I pray you will consider my suggestion."

When Cao Cao read these words, he was delighted and ordered his troops to hold their ground at all costs.

At this point, Yuan Shao's troops had backed off about 10 miles, so Cao Cao sent out scouts. One of them, a lieutenant from general Xu (2) Huang's (3) detachment by the name of Shi (3) Huan (4), captured a spy and took him to see Xu Huang. Upon questioning, the spy told Xu Huang that one of Yuan Shao's top generals, Han (2) Meng (3), was about to arrive with new provisions for Yuan Shao's troops, and that he had been sent ahead to scout out the roads.

Xu Huang reported this to Cao Cao, and the adviser Xun (2) You (1) said, "Han (2) Meng (3) is all brawn and no brain. If we send someone to lead a few thousand light cavalymen and attack them on the way, we can cut off their supply line, and Yuan Shao's army will fall into chaos."

So Cao Cao sent Xu Huang and Shi (3) Huan (4) on this mission with their detachment, and then sent the officers Zhang Liao (2) and Xu (2) Chu (3) as backup.

That night, Han (2) Meng (3) was escorting thousands of carts of grain toward Yuan Shao's camp when suddenly, from within a valley stormed out Xu Huang and Shi (3) Huan (4), blocking his way. Han (2) Meng (3) rode up to fight them, but was met by Xu Huang. Meanwhile, Shi (3) Huan (4) and company chased off the soldiers guarding the carts and set the provisions on fire. For his part, Han (2) Meng (3) could not hold his own against Xu Huang, so he turned and ran, while Xu Huang's forces burned every last cart.

Meanwhile, at Yuan Shao's camp, they saw the flames shooting up from the northwest and were alarmed. Just then, Han (2) Meng's (3) defeated troops came scurrying into camp and told them that the provisions had been taken. Yuan Shao quickly ordered the officers Zhang (1) He (2) and Gao (1)

Lan (3) to meet the enemy on the main road. They ran smack dab into Xu Huang's troops, who were returning to camp after carrying out their mission. Just as the two sides were about to clash, Cao Cao's backup forces, led by Zhang Liao and Xu Chu, arrived. Now sandwiched between two enemy forces, Yuan Shao's troops were defeated and scattered. Cao Cao's four generals returned to Guandu together, where an ecstatic Cao Cao rewarded them handsomely. He then sent troops to take up defensive positions in the shape of a pincer in front of his camp.

On Yuan Shao's side, when Han Meng limped back into camp, Yuan Shao was enraged and wanted to execute him, but was talked out of it by his officials.

"An army marches on its stomach," Shen Pei said to Yuan Shao. "We must take precautions. Our provisions are stored at Wuchao (1,2). It must be heavily guarded."

"I already have a plan in mind," Yuan Shao said. "You must go back to my capital Yejun (4,4) to ensure they prepare adequate provisions for the army."

After Shen Pei departed, Yuan Shao ordered one of his top officers, Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2), to lead four lieutenants and 20,000 troops to defend Wuchao (1,2). Well, this was a bad choice. Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2), renowned though he be, was a hot-tempered drunkard who was feared by his men. After assuming command at Wuchao, he spent his days drinking with his officers. Why, this doesn't sound like a recipe for disaster AT ALL.

At this moment, however, Cao Cao was having his own problems. Namely, he was out of provisions. He did not even have enough left to pull the trick where he orders a granary officer to cut the men's provisions and then lay the blame all on the granary officer, like he did back in episode 23. So he hurriedly sent a messenger back to Xuchang to ask Xun (2) Yu (4) to send more grains ASAP.

Before this messenger had gone 10 miles, however, he was captured by Yuan Shao's soldiers, who brought him to one of Yuan Shao's advisers, Xu (3) You (1).

Now this Xu (3) You (1) was a childhood friend of Cao Cao's, but now he is serving Cao Cao's nemesis. When he searched the messenger and found the letter about provisions, he immediately went to see Yuan Shao.

"Cao Cao has been in a stalemate with us at Guandu for a long time," Xu You said. "Xuchang must be vulnerable at this moment. If we sent a detachment of troops on a surprise attack of Xuchang, it will be ours, and Cao Cao will fall into our hands. Cao Cao has run out of provisions. This is our opportunity to split up and attack him on two fronts."

Yuan Shao, however, was not sold.

"Cao Cao is extremely shrewd. This letter is a trick to lure us into making a move."

"But if we don't take Xuchang now, we will be made to suffer for it down the road," Xu You argued.

Just then, a messenger arrived from Yuan Shao's capital, Yejun (4,4), with a letter from Shen Pei. The letter first addressed the issue of the provisions, but then it also said that when Xu You was stationed in Ji (4) Province, where Yejun (4,4) was located, he often took bribes. What's more, his son and nephew were raising taxes for personal profit, and as a result, Shen Pei had put them in jail.

This did not bode well for Xu You, as Yuan Shao flew into a rage. "You scoundrel! And you have the audacity to suggest battle tactics to me?! I know you and Cao Cao were old friends. Maybe he has bribed you into being his spy and trying to stir up trouble in our ranks! You should be executed, but I'll let you keep your head for now. Get out of my sight right now! From now on, I will not see you!"

Thus kicked out of Yuan Shao's tent, Xu You looked to the heavens and sighed, "What is the point of serving someone who turns a deaf ear to loyal advice? My son and nephew have already been done in by Shen Pei. How can I bear to face the people of Ji (4) Province?"

At that, he pulled out his sword and tried to slit his own throat, but his attendants quickly took the sword from him and said, "Sir, why do you take your own life so lightly? Yuan Shao refuses to listen to you, and he will surely fall to Cao Cao. Since you and Cao Cao are old acquaintances, why not abandon the darkness for the light?"

These words brought Xu You to his senses. So he immediately sneaked off in the direction of Cao Cao's camp. As he approached, he was picked up by Cao Cao's patrols, and Xu You told them, "I am prime minister Cao's old friend. Go tell him at once that Xu You is here to see him."

When the soldiers brought this message to Cao Cao, he had just disrobed and was about to turn in for the night. When he heard Xu You was there, however, he was so delighted that he did not even bother putting on shoes and instead ran barefoot out of his tent to greet Xu You. When he saw his old friend, he clapped, laughed, and took Xu You by the hand and led him into the tent. Cao Cao then prostrated on the ground.

Xu You quickly helped him up and said, "Sir, you are the prime minister of the Han, whereas I am a commoner. Why do you show such respect?"

"Sir, you are my old friend. How would I dare to pull rank with you?" Cao Cao answered.

"[Sigh] I picked the wrong master in Yuan Shao," Xu You said. "He would not listen to my advice, so I have left him to come see you, my old friend. I hope you will forgive me and take me into your service."

"With you here, I cannot fail!" Cao Cao said. "I hope you will tell me how to defeat Yuan Shao."

"I had told Yuan Shao to dispatch his light cavalry to attack Xuchang, so that you would be under siege from both front and back."

"If Yuan Shao does that, I would be doomed!"

"Sir, how much provisions do you have left?" Xu You asked knowingly.

"Enough to last a year" was Cao Cao's answer, which prompted a skeptical laugh from Xu You.



"I doubt that," he said.

"Ok, enough for half a year."

At that, Xu You gave a dismissive wave of his sleeve and began to walk out of the tent.

"I came here to join you on good faith, and yet I am greeted with deception. That is not what I was hoping for," he said.

Cao Cao stopped him and said, "Please do not take offense. To be honest, I have enough to last three months."

Xu You smiled and replied, "Everyone calls you crafty. Looks like they are right."

Cao Cao also smiled. "Have you not heard the saying that there is no such thing as too much deception in battle?"

Cao Cao then leaned over to Xu You's ear and whispered, "We only have enough for this month."

At this point, Xu You shouted, "Stop lying to me! You are all out!"

"How do you know that?!" a stunned Cao Cao asked.

Xu You then took out the letter he had intercepted and showed it to Cao Cao. "Who wrote this?" he asked.

"How did you come by this letter?" Cao Cao inquired.

So Xu You told him the whole story, at which point Cao Cao took his hand and said, "Since you have come here on account of our past friendship, I hope you will help me."

"Sir, you are facing an enemy with a numerical advantage. Why do you not seek a quick victory? Delaying will ensure your defeat," Xu You said. "I have an idea that can defeat Yuan Shao's immense army within three days without battle. Would you listen?"

"I welcome your sage counsel," a delighted Cao Cao said.

"Yuan Shao's provisions are all stored at Wuchao," Xu You said. "Right now he has put Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2) in charge of defending that location. This guy is an ill-prepared drunkard. You should

send some crack troops to Wuchao pretending to be Yuan Shao's officer Jiang (3) Qi (2) and set the place on fire. Within three days, Yuan Shao's army will fall into disarray."

Cao Cao was ecstatic upon receiving this advice. He rewarded Xu You handsomely and kept him in camp. The next day, Cao Cao rounded up 5,000 troops and prepared to personally lead them to Wuchao. The officer Zhang Liao, however, had his reservations.

"Wuchao is where Yuan Shao's provisions are stored; how can he not be prepared defensively?" he said. "Your excellency should not go so lightly. It may be a trap."

"Not so," Cao Cao said. "Xu You's defection is a sign that it is heaven's will for me to defeat Yuan Shao. Right now our provisions are low, and we cannot hold out for long. If I do not do as Xu You suggests, I would be a sitting duck. If he is trying to deceive me, why would he be willing to remain in my camp? I have long wanted to raid Yuan Shao's camp, and this attack on his grain storage is a must. Cast aside your doubts."

"But what if Yuan Shao attacks our camp while our troops are out?" Zhang Liao asked.

"I have already seen to that," Cao Cao said with a smile.

So Cao Cao ordered the advisers Xun (2) You (1) and Jia (3) Xu (3), along with the general Cao (2) Hong (2) to defend the main camp with Xu You. He then hid a force on the left side of the camp under the command of Xiahou Dun and Xiahou Yuan (1), and did likewise on the right side of the camp with Li (2) Dian (3) and Cao (2) Ren (2), just in case something unexpected happened.

As for the raiding party, Cao Cao put Zhang Liao and Xu Chu at the front, with Xu Huang and Yu (1) Jin (4) at the rear, while he himself led the other officers in the center. The 5,000 men carried Yuan Shao's banners, along with plenty of fire-starting material. To ensure silence while they marched, their horses were muzzled, and the men all kept a stick in their mouths so that they won't make a sound. They set off toward Wuchao around dusk.

That night, the sky was dotted with stars. In Yuan Shao's camp, the adviser Ju (3) Shou (4), who had been thrown into prison for irritating Yuan Shao with his loyal advice, noticed something odd about the sky, so he asked his guard to take him outside. As he looked up and studied the stars, he was alarmed.

"Catastrophe is near!" he said.

So Ju (3) Shou (4) begged to be allowed to see Yuan Shao right away. At this point, Yuan Shao was passed out drunk, but when he awoke to word that Ju Shou had important intel to report, he summoned him.

"The stars' arrangement tonight suggests trouble with an enemy raid," Ju Shou said. "We must take extra precautions with our grain storage at Wuchao. You should send crack troops and top generals to patrol the mountain passes to prevent Cao Cao from making a move."

This seemingly spot-on advice, however, was met with hostility from Yuan Shao.

"You are a prisoner! How dare you speak so wildly and try to mislead us?!"

Yuan Shao then took out his anger on the guard.

"I told you to lock him up! How dare you let him out?!"

So Yuan Shao had the guard executed and put someone else in charge of guarding Ju Shou. As Ju Shou was escorted out of Yuan Shao's tent, he covered his eyes and wept.

"Our army's demise is at hand; who knows where my body will lie!"

Now, back to Cao Cao and his raiding party. As they traveled toward Wuchao, they passed by one of Yuan Shao's outposts. The sentries asked who goes there, and Cao Cao's men answered, "It is general Jiang (3) Qi (2) going to Wuchao as ordered to guard the provisions." The sentries saw that this army was carrying Yuan Shao's banners, so they did not question them further. This same routine got Cao Cao's troops past every outpost along the way without any problems.

It was about 3 a.m. when they arrived at Wuchao. Cao Cao ordered his men to set the place on fire, and they stormed in with drums rolling and shouts roaring. At that time, Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2), the general who was supposed to be defending Wuchao, was passed out in his tent after another night of excess. When he was startled awake by the drums and roars, he jumped to his feet and asked, "What's all the ruckus?" But before he had finished speaking, he was already already tripped up by Cao Cao's men and captured.

A couple of his lieutenants had just returned from delivering provisions at that moment. When they saw Wuchao ablaze, they hurried over to help. Scouts quickly reported to Cao Cao, saying, "Enemy troops are coming from our rear; please split up the army to resist them."

However, Cao Cao shouted, "Everyone, keep pushing forward with everything you've got! Only when the enemy is right on our backs do we turn around and fight!"

At that command, all of his men surged ahead with all their might. Within moments, the fires were roaring and smoke covered the sky. When Chunyu (2,2) Qiong's (2) two lieutenants arrived on the scene, Cao Cao turned his army around to face them. These two were no match and were soon slain by Cao Cao's forces.

By now, all the provisions in storage at Wuchao had been reduced to ashes. When Chunyu (2,2) Qiong (2) was brought before Cao Cao, Cao Cao ordered that his ears, nose, and fingers be cut off. And then they tied him onto a horse and sent him back to Yuan Shao's camp to humiliate their enemy.

While all this was going on, Yuan Shao could see from his camp the flames from the north shooting skyward. He knew that this meant trouble at Wuchao, so he quickly assembled his staff to discuss how to respond. The general Zhang He (2) said, "General Gao (1) Lan (3) and I will go to save Wuchao."

But the adviser Guo (1) Tu (2) disagreed. "You cannot go," he said. "Cao Cao must be personally leading the raiding party. With him gone, his camp must be vulnerable. We should attack his camp. When Cao Cao hears this, he would turn around at once."

"No," Zhang He said. "Cao Cao is shrewd. If he is out, then he must have taken precautions at his camp. If we attack Cao Cao's camp and fail, then Chunyu Qiong will be captured, and so will we!"

"Cao Cao is just concerned about raiding our provisions; how could he have taken any precautions at his camp?" Guo Tu countered.

After the two of them went back and forth like this for a bit, Yuan Shao split the difference. He sent Zhang He and Gao Lan (3) with 5,000 troops to attack Cao Cao's camp at Guandu, while sending Jiang (3) Qi (2) with 10,000 men to Wuchao.

Back at Wuchao, Cao Cao had already achieved total victory. He now ordered his men to don the uniforms of the defeated enemy and pretend to be Chunyu Qiong's soldiers heading back toward camp. On the mountain backroads, they ran into Jiang (3) Qi's (2) relief force. When Jiang Qi's men asked, they said they were defeated soldiers from Wuchao retreating back to the main camp. Jiang Qi bought their story and was riding past them when Cao Cao's generals Zhang Liao and Xu Chu suddenly appeared and shouted for Jiang Qi to stop. Caught off guard, Jiang Qi was cut down by Zhang Liao, and his troops were routed.

Cao Cao then kept up the charade by sending someone back to Yuan Shao's camp to report that, "No worries. Jiang Qi has chased off the enemy at Wuchao, and everything is a-ok." Yuan Shao fell for the ruse and thought nothing more of Wuchao. Instead, he sent more troops to attack Guandu.

At Guandu, when Zhang He and Gao Lan (3) arrived at the head of Yuan Shao's army, they were greeted by three armies that stormed out, led by Xiahou Dun on the left, Cao Ren on the right, and

Cao Hong in the center. Yuan Shao's army was beaten soundly. Just as their reinforcement arrived, so did Cao Cao's raiding party. Yuan Shao's men were now surrounded. Zhang He and Gao Lan managed to fight their way out, but the attack on Cao Cao's camp was a disaster.

Back at Yuan Shao's camp, the real defeated soldiers from Wuchao finally limped back and told Yuan Shao what actually happened. When he saw Chunyu Qiong show up missing his nose, ears, and fingers, Yuan Shao asked him, "How was Wuchao lost?!"

The defeated soldiers told him, "Chunyu Qiong was passed out drunk and thus could not mount a defense."

Yuan Shao flew into a rage and immediately had his disgraced general executed. At that moment, his adviser Guo (1) Tu (2) was more worried about his other generals, Zhang He and Gao Lan. After all, they were against his idea of attacking Cao Cao's camp. So if they come back now, after that idea blew up in everyone's face, who's to say Guo Tu himself might not be the next one on the chopping block? So Guo Tu resorted to some dirty tricks to save his own neck.

"Zhang He and Gao Lan are no doubt happy to see your lordship suffer a defeat," he told Yuan Shao.

"What do you mean?" Yuan Shao asked.

"Those two have long harbored thoughts of surrendering to Cao Cao. That's why they intentionally botched the attack on his camp, causing us to lose soldiers."

Yuan Shao flew into another rage and immediately sent a messenger to summon the two officers back to camp for punishment. But before that messenger could get there, Guo Tu sent his own man to see Zhang He and Gao Lan, telling them, "His lordship wants to kill you."

So how is Zhang He and Gao Lan going to react when the real messenger from Yuan Shao shows up? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.