

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 62.

Last time, Cao Cao's dreams of conquering the South had gone up in flames along with his fleet and his army at the Battle of Red Cliff. He had come South with an army of 830,000, but now, he was fleeing with only about 300 men. And every time he felt safe enough to start feeling smug about how he was still a notch smarter than Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang, he was promptly sent running again by an ambush. And now, just as he was mocking his foes for not laying a trap for him at the narrow path of Huarong Trail, he was greeted by Guan Yu, who had been waiting there on Zhuge Liang's orders.

"With things as they are, we have no choice but to fight for our lives!" Cao Cao told his men.

But to this, his generals were all like, "We love to ... but ..."

"Even though we are able to fight, our horses are too exhausted. They cannot go into battle again," they told him.

One of Cao Cao's advisers, Cheng Yu, suggested a different tact.

"I know that Guan Yu disdains the high and mighty but pities the lowly; he is short with the strong but does not bully the weak. He draws a clear line between obligation and enmity, and is a man of good faith and honor. Your excellency once bestowed kindness upon him. If you remind him of that now, you could escape this calamity."

Well, at this point, Cao Cao really had nothing to lose by trying, so he figured, what the heck. He rode forward alone and bowed to Guan Yu from atop his horse.

"General, how have you been?"

Guan Yu bowed in return and said, "I have been waiting here for your excellency on orders from my military adviser." In other words, I've got a job to do, so don't try to talk your way out of this one.

“I have been defeated and my troops are in dire straits,” Cao Cao said. “We have no way out. I hope, general, that our past ties still mean something to you.”

“Even though I did receive great kindness from your excellency in the past, I have already repaid you by slaying Yan Liang and Wen Chou and relieving the siege of Baima (2,3),” Guan Yu answered. “As for the matter at hand, how can I dare to allow personal ties trump state business?”

Ok, so good so far for Guan Yu. He’s not wavering in the face of Cao Cao’s appeal. But Cao Cao wasn’t just about to roll over and give up.

“Do you still remember when you stormed through five checkpoints and killed six of my officers?” Cao Cao asked. “A man must place good faith and honor above all else. You have a deep understanding of the Spring and Autumn Annals. Do you not know the story of Yugong (2,1) Zhizi (1,3) pursuing Zizhuo (3,4) Ruzi (2,3)?”

Whoa there, Cao Cao. Slow down with the cultural references! So the Spring and Autumn Annals is a history about the Spring and Autumn Period. If you have been paying any attention at all in our podcast, you would know that this is a period whose characters and stories have a dramatic influence over the culture and characters in our novel. Guan Yu, in particular, has boasted on multiple occasions about how he is well-versed in this history.

Now, as for the particular story that Cao Cao cites here both Yugong (2,1) Zhizi (1,3) and Zizhuo (3,4) Ruzi (2,3) were standout archers from the Spring and Autumn period. Their names are a mouthful, so I’ll just call them Archer A and Archer B. At one point, one of the kingdoms sent Archer A to kill Archer B. It just so happened that Archer B was too sick on this particular occasion to even raise his bow to defend himself. When Archer A caught up to him, it should have been an easy kill, but Archer A held off.

“My master was your student,” Archer A told his prey. “I cannot bear to use the skills that you have passed on to us to take your life.”

So in a symbolic gesture, Archer A broke off the tip of four arrows and fired four harmless shafts, one in each direction, and then rode off. Cao Cao’s point to Guan Yu in reminding him of this story was that one should not kick an enemy while he’s down.

This, of course, was pushing all sorts of buttons in Guan Yu’s honor-filled head. Add to the top of that Cao Cao’s past kindness in letting him leave knowing full well he was going to rejoin Liu Bei. Not only that, remember that when Cao Cao learned that Guan Yu had stormed through the five checkpoints and killed the six officers, his reaction was to send one messenger after another to make sure that nobody else gave Guan Yu any trouble on his journey. So, yeah, Guan Yu really did still owe Cao Cao something.

And if that still wasn’t enough, one look at Cao Cao’s pitiful, frightened, haggard, and sobbing followers was enough to close the deal.

Guan Yu turned his horse around and said to his soldiers, “Spread out and make way!”

Cao Cao and his men did not miss the message. As soon as Guan Yu’s men opened up a path, Cao Cao and company rushed past them. By the time Guan Yu had turned his horse around again, they were already on the other side of him.

But just then, Guan Yu had a change of heart, and he let out a mighty roar. At this, Cao Cao and all of his officers climbed off their horses, kneeled on the ground, and wept. If they were a sorry sight before, they were just outright pathetic now. Faced with this, Guan Yu hesitated again.

At that moment, someone else rode up on the scene from behind. It was Cao Cao’s general Zhang Liao, who had been bringing up the rear and just now got here, so he found his path cut off by Guan

Yu. Remember that when Guan Yu was in Cao Cao's service, out of all of Cao Cao's officers, Zhang Liao was the one who had been the chummiest with him.

Thinking of their old friendship, Guan Yu let out a deep sigh and signaled for Zhang Liao to pass and for Cao Cao and his men to go.

A poet later wrote about this luckiest of all lucky escapes for Cao Cao:

Cao Cao fled along the Huarong Trail,  
But Guan Yu barred his passage hardily.  
Then, weighing obligation once incurred,  
He slipped the lock and let the dragon free.

So if this were a Hollywood production, this is where Cao Cao scurries back to the North, never to encroach on the South again. Zhou Yu realizes that only by putting aside his enmity toward Zhuge Liang can Dongwu and Liu Bei strike an alliance that guarantees their mutual survival. So the two sides become eternal friends and they all live happily ever after. THE END.

Except not. This isn't Hollywood. This is Chinese historical fiction, and we've still got 60 percent of the novel to go. So let's see what happens after the end credit finished rolling.

Having survived his close encounter with Guan Yu, Cao Cao kept fleeing until he reached the mouth exiting the canyon. When Cao Cao looked back, he saw that he now only had 27 riders with him. Again, remember that he had gone into the previous night's battle with 830,000 men. And even when he started fleeing for his life, at one point he had around 3,000 men. So attrition was not kind to him over the past 24 hours or so.

By now, it was starting to get dark, and Cao Cao and company were approaching Nanjun (2,4). Suddenly, they came across a squad of soldiers holding torches and blocking their path.

“I am done for!” a panicked Cao Cao cried.

However, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw a group of riders approaching. These were his men, under the command of his kinsman Cao Ren, who had been stationed here to hold down the fort.

“I had heard about your defeat but did not dare to venture too far from my post,” Cao Ren told Cao Cao upon receiving him. “So I have been waiting for you here.”

“I thought I would never see you again!” Cao Cao told him.

They then led their men into Nanjun (2,4) for some much needed rest. Shortly behind them came Zhang Liao, who told them about how Guan Yu had let him pass, too, and oh yeah, thanks for waiting for ME, guys.

Cao Cao took a head count and many of the guys that managed to stay with him were bearing injuries, so he told them all to get some treatment and rest. Cao Ren then put on a banquet to cheer him up, and Cao Cao’s advisers were in attendance.

Suddenly, in the middle of this banquet, Cao Cao looked up to the heavens and wailed. This puzzled his advisers.

“When your excellency was fleeing from danger in the tiger’s den, you showed no sign of fear,” they said. “Now that we have made it here, both men and horses have food, and it is time to regroup and seek revenge. Why do you cry so bitterly now?”

“I am crying for Guo (1) Jia (1),” Cao Cao told them. And since we haven’t mentioned Guo Jia in quite a while, let me refresh your memory: He was one of Cao Cao’s most brilliant strategists, but he died from illness at a relatively early age during the home stretch of Cao Cao’s Northern campaigns.

“If Guo Jia was here,” Cao Cao continued, “he would not have allowed me to make such a huge mistake!”

Cao Cao then beat his chest and kept wailing. “I grieve for you, Guo Jia! Oh, what a loss! What a loss!”

As you can imagine, the rest of the advisers were quite ashamed by this, and the banquet probably did not do much for anybody’s morale.

Still, the next day, Cao Cao was ready to move on. He told Cao Ren, “I am going back to the capital Xuchang for now to reorganize my army. I shall avenge this defeat. You stay here and protect Nanjun. I am leaving you with a secret strategy. Do not open this until the situation is dire. If the situation does become urgent, read it and act accordingly, and Dongwu will not dare to set its sights on Nanjun.”

“But what about the cities of Hefei (2,2) and Xiangyang (1,2)? Who can defend those locations?” Cao Ren asked.

“You just worry about Jing (1) Province,” Cao Cao told him. “I have already dispatched Xiahou Dun to defend Xiangyang. As for Hefei, it’s the most crucial location. I have appointed Zhang Liao as the chief commander there, with Yue (4) Jin (4) and Li Dian as his lieutenants. If there’s any trouble, send word to me at once.”

With these arrangements in place, Cao Cao began his trek back to Xuchang. As for the civil and military officials from Jing Province who had surrendered to him earlier in the campaign, he brought them all back to the capital for jobs there, probably because it’s a bad idea to leave these guys alone in their home province, where they just might be tempted to throw off the yoke in Cao Cao’s absence.

So let's reset quickly. Cao Cao's dream of overrunning the Southlands and eliminating Liu Bei and Sun Quan was obviously a gigantic bust. But he did not come away from his Southern campaign empty-handed. He still held control over most of Jing Province.

The Southlands, of course, was now safe from Cao Cao's incursion and feeling mighty good about itself, although they had to know that Cao Cao would be coming back for revenge at some point.

As for Liu Bei and company, they were likely breathing a huge sigh of relief since they no longer had Cao Cao breathing down their necks. At this point, though, Liu Bei was still not particularly strong. He still only held a couple cities along the Yangzi (2,3) River, and what happens to his alliance with the Southlands now that their common foe has been defeated, at least for the time being?

Before we get to all that, though, let's tie up one not-so-minor loose end. Before Guan Yu had set out to wait for Cao Cao at Huarong Trail, he had basically made a bet with Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang promised that Cao Cao would come through Huarong Trail, while Guan Yu swore that if he did, then he would not get away, past kindness be damned. They also upped the ante by both writing military pledges, which meant that if either one's promise fell through, they were supposed to be punished by military law, which basically meant getting your head chopped off. So what's Guan Yu going to do now?

He would find out soon enough. By the time Guan Yu made it back to Liu Bei's headquarters at Xiakou, all the other officers had already returned from their missions, weighed down with horses, weapons, prisoners, and provisions that they had seized from Cao Cao's army. Guan Yu, meanwhile, came back totally empty handed, without a single prisoner or horse to his name.

Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei were in the midst of celebrating when they got word that Guan Yu was back. Zhuge Liang hurriedly left his seat and greeted Guan Yu with a raised cup.

“Congratulations, general!” Zhuge Liang exclaimed. “You have accomplished an epoch-making deed in ridding the land of a giant evil! I should have come out to receive you on your way here!”

While Zhuge Liang gushed, Guan Yu remained silent.

“General, are you unhappy because we did not come out to welcome you on the road?” Zhuge Liang asked. He then pretend-admonished a couple attendants for not telling him sooner that Guan Yu was on his way back.

“I have come to ask for death,” Guan Yu said.

“Oh? Did Cao Cao not come through Huarong Trail?” Zhuge Liang asked knowingly. He was clearly going to enjoy every minute of this.

“Cao Cao did come through there. But I was useless and allowed him to get away.”

“Did you capture any of his officers or soldiers?”

“No.”

“Well then, I think, General Guan, you must have let Cao Cao go because of his past kindness to you. Alas, you wrote a military pledge, so I have no choice but to act according to military law.”

At that, Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to take Guan Yu outside and execute him.

Well, it was high time to wrap up this little charade, so Liu Bei now intervened and pretend-begged on Guan Yu’s behalf.

“When we became brothers, the three of us swore an oath to live and die together,” he said. “I know brother Guan has violated regulations, but I cannot bear to break our oath. I hope you will show mercy and allow him to atone for his offense with future service.”

After a little requisite “ok, you twisted my arm,” Zhuge Liang called off the guards and spared Guan Yu. Of course, Guan Yu, who had always been a little haughty in his dealings with Zhuge Liang, now owes him one. Point, Zhuge Liang.



So let's leave Liu Bei's victory party and check in on the troops of the Southlands, who were partying pretty hard themselves. Zhou Yu, the commander of the Dongwu forces, saw all his officers return triumphantly from their assignments and recorded all their deeds to report to Sun Quan. As for all the enemy soldiers who had been taken prisoner, he showed them mercy and sent them all back across the river. He then feasted with his men and rewarded his troops.

The celebration did not last too long, though, because soon Zhou Yu was on the move again, marching his army toward Nanjun with the intent to capture the city. He set up five camps along the bank of the river, with Zhou Yu in the center camp, where he assembled his staff to discuss how to attack the city.

Just then, word came that Liu Bei had dispatched one of his civil officials, Sun Qian (2), to come offer his congratulations on the victory. After Sun Qian came in and presented the gifts from Liu Bei, Zhou Yu asked him where Liu Bei was at this time.

"He has moved his army to the mouth of the You (2) River," Sun Qian answered.

This set off alarm bells in Zhou Yu's head, because that meant Liu Bei was in the neighborhood. Hmm, what could he possibly be doing here?

"Is Zhuge Liang with him?" Zhou Yu asked.

"Indeed, Zhuge Liang is with my lord at the mouth of the You (2) River."

"Sir, you may go. I shall personally go to return your lord's thanks," Zhou Yu said.

After Sun Qian took his leave, Zhou Yu's confidant Lu Su asked him, "Commander, why did you look so alarmed just now?"

"Liu Bei is garrisoning his troops on the You (2) River; he must have designs on Nanjun," Zhou Yu said. "We have sacrificed so many men and used up so much treasure and provisions in this battle.

Now, with Nanjun in the palm of our hands, Liu Bei is acting dishonorably and trying to take advantage of us. Hmmph, over my dead body!!”

“How should we deal with them?”

“I will go speak with them personally. If they are reasonable, fine. But if not, then I will end Liu Bei before he even has a chance to take Nanjun!”

So this is not shaping up to be an everlasting alliance here, which, I suppose, could hardly be a surprise given the two sides’ mutual suspicions even when Cao Cao was sitting right across the river from them. So Zhou Yu and Lu Su set off with 3,000 light cavalry toward Liu Bei’s camp by the You (2) River.

By now, Sun Qian had returned to Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang and told them that Zhou Yu said he was coming to thank Liu Bei for the gifts.

“Why is he coming?” Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang.

“He’s not coming because of a few presents, that’s for sure,” Zhuge Liang with a smile. “He’s coming for Nanjun.”

“If he brings troops with him, how should we respond?”

Zhuce Liang told Liu Bei how to proceed, and Liu Bei ordered his troops to line up their warships and take their station on the ships to put on a strong front.

When word came that Zhou Yu and Lu Su had arrived with some troops, Zhuge Liang sent Zhao Yun to lead a few riders to welcome them and escort them in. As they made their way toward the camp, Zhou Yu saw the impressive-looking troops that Zhuge Liang had put out for him to see, and he felt rather uneasy.

At the gates of the camp, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang greeted their visitors and invited them to the main tent, where they all exchanged gifts and sat down for a feast. Liu Bei raised his cup and toasted Zhou Yu to thank him for his part in defeating Cao Cao.

After a few rounds of wine, Zhou Yu cut to the chase.

“Lord Liu. Did you move your army here intending to take Nanjun?”

“Commander, I heard that you were intending to take Nanjun, so I have come to help you,” Liu Bei answered. “If you don’t take it, then I shall.”

“Dongwu has long wanted to seize control of the Han (4) River,” Zhou Yu said. “Now that Nanjun is in the palm of our hands, how can we not take it?”

To this, Liu Bei clarified that, oh, I meant if you CAN’T take it.

“Victory and defeat are not guaranteed,” Liu Bei said. “Before he went back to the capital, Cao Cao left Cao Ren to defend Nanjun and other key locations. He must have devised some cunning strategy, not to mention that Cao Ren is quite a fearsome warrior. I worry that you may not be able to take the city.”

“If I cannot take Nanjun, then you may try to take it with my blessings,” Zhou Yu said.

“Agreed,” Liu Bei said. “Lu Su and Zhuge Liang can both serve as witnesses. You must not regret your words.”

While Lu Su was trying to go, whoa, hold on there, Zhou Yu responded without hesitation.

“Once a man has spoken, he never regrets his words!”

“Commander, your proposal is quite fair,” Zhuge Liang chimed in. “We will let Dongwu try to take the city first. If you cannot, then it’s fine for my lord to take it.”

Agreement in hand, Zhou Yu and Lu Su took their leave. As soon as they left, Liu Bei turned to Zhuge Liang and asked:

“I was telling them what you told me to tell them just now. But now that I think about it, I am confused. I have no foothold right now. That’s why I want to take Nanjun as a refuge. But if we let Zhou Yu get first crack at it and Dongwu takes it, then where would we stay?”

This made Zhuge Liang laugh out loud.

“Back when I advised your lordship to take Jing Province, you refused to listen. Why the change of heart now?”

“Back then, the province belonged to my kinsman Liu Biao. That’s why I could not bear to take it. But now it belongs to Cao Cao, so it’s only right that I take it.”

“My lord, have no worries. Let Zhou Yu go fight to his heart’s content. Sooner or later, I shall have you sitting pretty inside Nanjun.”

Liu Bei didn’t know what Zhuge Liang had in mind, but given the man’s track record, this assurance was enough to cheer him up. So Liu Bei kept his army right where it was and waited.

As for Zhou Yu, after he returned to camp, Lu Su asked him why he would agree to even give Liu Bei a chance to take Nanjun.

“I can snap my fingers and take that city,” Zhou Yu said. “I was just granting them a meaningless favor.”

Zhou Yu then asked his officers who wanted to be the vanguard in the siege, and the general Jiang (3) Qin (1) stepped up. Zhou Yu sent him, along with the officers Xu (2) Sheng (4) and Ding (1) Feng (4), as well as 5,000 crack troops to cross the river and attack, while Zhou Yu himself would follow with the main army.

On the other side of the river, Cao Ren was defending Nanjun, with his kinsman and fellow officer Cao Hong (2) holding down the nearby city of Yiling (1,2), creating a pincer formation where they could come to each other's aid if either one was attacked.

When Cao Ren got word that the Dongwu forces had crossed the Han (4) River, he was inclined to just stay inside the city and defend rather than go out to give battle. However, one of his officers, Niu (2) Jin (1), protested.

"To not fight when the enemy is at our doorstep is a sign of cowardice. Our army is fresh off a defeat, so we must reignite our morale. I would like to lead 500 crack troops and go fight it out!"

Moved by his courage, Cao Ren consented and sent Niu (2) Jin (1) out with 500 men. On Dongwu's side, the general Ding Feng rode out to meet Niu Jin. After a few bouts, Ding Feng pretended to flee, luring Niu Jin and his men to chase him into the Dongwu troops' formation, at which point Ding Feng ordered his men to surround the enemy. Niu Jin dashed left and right in an attempt to break out, but could not.

Seeing his men trapped by the enemy, Cao Ren could not sit back. He donned his armor, hopped on his horse, and led a few hundred stout riders out of the city. Wielding his saber, Cao Ren led his men and poured into Dongwu's formation. The general Xu Sheng took them on but could not withstand the charge. Cao Ren slashed his way to the heart of the formation and rescued Niu Jin, and they fought their way back out again.

Along the way, they ran into the commander of Dongwu's vanguard, Jiang (3) Qin (1), who was trying to stop them. But Cao Ren and Niu Jin mustered their strength and scattered Jiang Qin's troops. At that moment, they also got help from a relief force led by Cao Ren's younger brother, so they joined forces and sent the Dongwu troops scurrying and then returned to the city in triumph.

When Jiang Qin limped back to tell Zhou Yu that he had botched the initial attack, Zhou Yu was irate and wanted to execute him, but was talked out of it by the other officers. Zhou Yu then wanted to mobilize his troops and go take on Cao Ren himself, but the general Gan Ning spoke up against it.

“Commander, we must not act rashly. Cao Ren and Cao Hong are in a pincer formation. I would like to first take 3,000 troops to attack Cao Hong at Yiling (1,2). Then you can take Nanjun.”

Zhou Yu saw the logic in his argument, so he gave Gan Ning the 3,000 men and sent him to attack Yiling (1,2). But word of this soon leaked out to Cao Ren, and his advisers told him that he must send help to Yiling. So Cao Ren secretly dispatched an army led by his younger brother and Niu Jin, and they sent word on ahead to Cao Hong that help was on the way and that he should set a trap for the enemy.

When Gan Ning arrived at the city of Yiling, Cao Hong rode out to fight him. After 20-some bouts, Cao Hong rode away in defeat, and Gan Ning took the city with little difficulty. When dusk set in, though, the enemy’s relief force arrived and trapped Gan Ning inside the city.

Ok, so now what were Gan Ning and Zhou Yu going to do? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.