

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 65.

Before we pick up where we left off, I would like to encourage those of you who have not rated the podcast on iTunes to take a minute and do that, so as to help others discover the show. And as always, thank you for your support!

So, last time, Zhang Fei had just conquered the county of Wuling (3,2) and sent word to Liu Bei. Liu Bei personally traveled to the city to make nice with the locals. He then sent a letter to his brother Guan Yu, who had been staying behind to defend Jing Province while Liu Bei went out a-conquerin'. The letter told Guan Yu that, hey, your buddies Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun have each conquered a county. And you can guess Guan Yu's reaction.

A letter from Guan Yu soon arrived in Liu Bei's hands. It said, "I have heard that the county of Changsha (2,1) has yet to be taken. If you do not think me unworthy, please allow me to render this service to you."

Liu Bei was delighted when he read the letter, so he sent Zhang Fei to take Guan Yu's place in Jing Province and ordered Guan Yu to take Changsha. Before heading to Changsha, Guan Yu went to Wuling (3,2) to see Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang.

"When General Zhao took Guiyang and General Zhang took Wuling, they each had 3,000 troops," Zhuge Liang said to Guan Yu. "Changsha's governor, Han (2) Xuan (2), is of no concern, but he has a valiant general named Huang (2) Zhong (1). He served as a corps commander under Liu Biao and helped Liu Biao's nephew oversee Changsha before serving Han (2) Xuan (2). Even though he is nearing 60, he is still extremely valiant and must not be underestimated. General Guan, you must take more troops with you."

"Master Zhuge, why do you play up others' mettle and dampen our own spirit?" Guan Yu asked. "What is there to worry about with a mere old pawn? I don't even need 3,000 men. I will just take the

500 swordsmen under my command, and I guarantee that I will bring you the heads of Huang Zhong and Han (2) Xuan (2).”

Liu Bei tried time and again to convince Guan Yu to reconsider, but Guan Yu refused to budge and went off with his 500 swordsmen. After he left, Zhuge Liang said to Liu Bei, “General Guan underestimates Huang Zhong. Your lordship should go reinforce him, just in case.”

Liu Bei agreed and led some troops toward Changsha after Guan Yu.

Meanwhile in Changsha, the governor, Han Xuan, was not a popular man at all. He had an unstable temper and had a hairy trigger on the executioner’s axe, qualities that did not endear him to the people of the county. When he heard that Guan Yu was approaching, he met with Huang Zhong to discuss how to repel the enemy.

“My lord, have no worries,” Huang Zhong said. “On the strength of my saber and my bow, I will slay every enemy that comes this way!”

And apparently Huang Zhong was not making an idle boast. One popular trope in ancient Chinese stories is the old general who refuses to bow to his age, and Huang Zhong filled this role perfectly. He was strong enough to pull a 250-pound bow and was deadly accurate with his shot.

Someone else, though, did make an idle boast. It was an officer named Yang (2) Ling (2). He stepped up and said, “Old general, there’s no need for you to go fight. I can go capture Guan Yu alive!”

This eagerness impressed Han Xuan, and he granted Yang Ling’s request. Yang Ling led 1,000 men outside the city to go meet the enemy. After about 15 miles, they saw a cloud of dust approaching. It was Guan Yu’s army. When the two sides met, Yang Ling rode out with spear in hand and cursed Guan Yu, which, as you might imagine, was not a bright idea.

Enraged by this disrespect, Guan Yu did not bother saying a word. He galloped toward Yang Ling and cut him down within three bouts. Guan Yu then chased the defeated troops all the way to the foot of the city.

When Han Xuan heard the news, he was alarmed and asked Huang Zhong to go fight Guan Yu, while he himself observed from the atop city wall. So Huang Zhong grabbed his saber, hopped on his horse, and led 500 riders across the drawbridge. Seeing an old general ride out, Guan Yu assumed that it was Huang Zhong, so he told his 500 men to spread out in a line while he asked the oncoming general, “Are you Huang Zhong?”

“Since you have heard of my name, how dare you encroach on my domain?” Huang Zhong said.

“I have come specifically for your head!” Guan Yu answered, and the two warriors promptly threw themselves at each other. They traded blows for 100-some bouts, and neither had the upper hand. This was quite an impressive feat on Huang Zhong’s part, considering how short most of Guan Yu’s encounters with enemy generals in the novel tend to be.

Han Xuan, however, was worried that Huang Zhong might slip up after 100-some bouts, so he rang the gong to order retreat. So Huang Zhong returned to the city, while Guan Yu had his troops back off about three miles from the city and set up camp.

“That old general Huang Zhong lives up to his reputation,” Guan Yu thought to himself admiringly. “He fought me for 100 bouts without showing any weaknesses. Tomorrow, I must use the trailing saber trick to kill him.”

The trailing saber trick, by the way, is a tactic where you pretend to lose and lure your opponent to chase you while you run and drag your saber behind you. When the opponent gets close, you surprise him by suddenly whirling around and doing a 360 with your saber to slash your opponent. This was kind of Guan Yu’s bread-and-butter move.

So the next day after breakfast, Guan Yu went to challenge for battle again, and Han Xuan once again sent Huang Zhong out to answer. Huang Zhong and Guan Yu fought for another 50-some bouts without a winner, and men on both sides were cheering. Suddenly, in the heat of battle, Guan Yu turned and galloped away. Huang Zhong gave chase, just as Guan Yu intended. When Huang Zhong got near, Guan Yu prepared to turn and slash, but in that moment, he heard a loud crash behind him.

Guan Yu turned and looked. He saw Huang Zhong sprawled out on the ground. Apparently the front legs of Huang Zhong's horse had given out at that very moment, and Huang Zhong was thrown to the ground, making him defenseless and an easy kill.

But anyone who knows Guan Yu knows that he was not one to take advantage of a hapless opponent. He's the guy who, when he kills you, he wants you on your horse, facing him, with a weapon in your hand. So Guan Yu raised his saber with both hands and said to Huang Zhong, "I will spare your life for now! Go get another horse and come back to fight me!"

Given a reprieve, Huang Zhong pulled his horse off the ground, hopped on, and galloped back inside the city. When Han Xuan asked him what happened out there, Huang Zhong said, "This horse had not seen battle for a long time. That's why it lost its footing."

"Your arrows never miss. Why don't you shoot Guan Yu?" Han Xuan suggested.

"Tomorrow when I fight him again, I will pretend to lose, lure him to the drawbridge and shoot him down," Huang Zhong said.

Han Xuan then gave Huang Zhong a black horse from his own stable, and Huang Zhong thanked him and took his leave. But Huang Zhong was feeling pretty conflicted that night.

"Guan Yu is uncommonly honorable," he thought to himself. "Since he could not bring himself to kill me, how can I bring myself to shoot him? But if I don't, then I would be going against Han Xuan's orders."

The next day at dawn, Guan Yu was back looking for another fight. Huang Zhong once again went out to meet him. By now, Guan Yu has had two dogfights with Huang Zhong and had not been able to defeat him, the whole horse-flipping thing notwithstanding, so Guan Yu was itching to finish the job and thus fought extra hard.

After less than 30 bouts, Huang Zhong turned and fled, and Guan Yu gave chase. When Huang Zhong got to the foot of the drawbridge, he pulled out his bow and took aim. But, he just could not bring himself to kill Guan Yu. So the first time he pulled his bowstring back, he did not load an arrow. Instead, he just fired nothing. When Guan Yu heard the twang of the bowstring, he dodged, but immediately realized he was dodging air. So he kept on coming.

Huang Zhong now pulled his bowstring back again, and again he fired nothing. Guan Yu dodged again, and realized again that there was no arrow. At this point, he just figured that Huang Zhong didn't actually know how to shoot, so he closed in without any reservations.

When Guan Yu approached the drawbridge, however, Huang Zhong pulled back his bowstring a third time, and this time, the bow was loaded. When Huang Zhong let the string go, an arrow flew toward Guan Yu. But instead of hitting him where it hurt, the arrow struck the base of the decorative tuft at the top of Guan Yu's helmet, drawing a round of cheers from the troops.

Guan Yu was taken aback by this shot and quickly turned and returned to camp. He was smart enough to know that Huang Zhong did not miss; he was aiming for the tuft instead of, say, Guan Yu's face, as payback for Guan Yu sparing his life a day earlier.

Guan Yu was not the only one to recognize this. When Huang Zhong returned to the city, he was met by an irate Han Xuan, who ordered the guards to arrest him and execute him at once.

"I have done nothing!" Huang Zhong protested.

“I have been observing you for three days; how dare you deceive me!” Han Xuan said angrily. “The day before yesterday, you did not fight to the best of your abilities. That shows you harbor ulterior interests. Yesterday, when your horse lost its footing, Guan Yu did not kill you. That shows you two must be in cahoots. And today, you pretended to shoot twice before aiming only for the top of his helmet. How can the two of you not be conspiring?! If I don’t kill you now, you will come back to bite me later!”

Han Xuan then told the guards to proceed with the beheading. When the other officers tried to beg for leniency, Han Xuan told them that anyone who dared to speak up for Huang Zhong would share his fate.

The executioners dragged Huang Zhong outside. They were just about to bring the knife down on his neck when suddenly an officer slashed his way in, cut down the executioners, and helped Huang Zhong to his feet.

“General Huang is the shield of Changsha!” this man shouted. “If you kill him, you are killing the people of Changsha! Han Xuan is cruel and inhumane. He treats talented men with disdain. We should all kill him. Those who are willing, come with me!”

Everyone looked to see who this was. He had a face as red as a date and eyes as bright as stars. This was Wei (4) Yan (2). He’s a cat that we’ve met before. Think back a few episodes. Liu Bei was trying to seek refuge from Cao Cao’s army in the city of Xiangyang (1,2), but was kept out by Liu Biao’s younger son, Liu Cong (2). Wei (4) Yan (2), an officer under Liu Cong, opened the gates and invited Liu Bei in to sack the city, but Liu Bei did his “Woe are my hundred thousand civilian followers who are being put in harm’s way” thing and refused to go in. As a result, Wei Yan was left to fend for himself, and he lost. He tried to catch up with Liu Bei but couldn’t find him amid all the chaos at the time, so he fled to Changsha, where Han Xuan took him in. But Han Xuan did not like Wei Yan’s rather high

opinion of himself and therefore did not make much use of him. So you can see how Wei Yan might be holding a grudge.

After he rescued Huang Zhong, Wei Yan gathered up a throng of civilians who were also not big fans of Han Xuan. He led a few hundred men and stormed toward the top of the city walls, ignoring Huang Zhong's pleas for him to stop. When he had fought his way to the top, Wei Yan removed Han Xuan's head with one swing of his knife. He took the head, hopped on a horse, and led his civilian followers outside the city to surrender to Guan Yu.

Guan Yu was ecstatic about this turn of events. He immediately entered the city to restore order. Once that was done, he invited Huang Zhong to come meet him, but Huang Zhong, feeling rather down about what happened, declined the invitation on the excuse that he was sick. Meanwhile, Guan Yu sent word to Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang.

Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang were en route to Changsha with reinforcements when suddenly a blue-green banner fell and rolled up while a south-flying crow let out three squawks.

"What do these omens portend?" Liu Bei asked.

Zhuce Liang did a little calculation from atop his horse and replied, "Changsha is ours, and your lordship will gain a major general. You will see shortly after noon time."

Moments later, a soldier rushed onto the scene with a message: "General Guan has taken Changsha. The officers Huang Zhong and Wei Yan have surrendered. They are awaiting your lordship's arrival."

Liu Bei was delighted when he heard the news. When he got to Changsha, Guan Yu welcomed him and told him that Huang Zhong was being an anti-social grump locked up in his house. Liu Bei then personally went to Huang Zhong's home to see him. This gesture was enough to convince Huang Zhong of Liu Bei's worthiness, and Huang Zhong came out and surrendered. But he also asked Liu Bei

to allow Han Xuan's remains to be buried east of the city. As part of his kill-them-with-kindness benefits package, Liu Bei granted this request. For his loyalty to his dead master, whose last act was to order his execution, a poet later praised Huang Zhong thus:

His martial powers set him high as heaven,
Yet in the end this greybeard went in bonds.
Resigned to death, he held no man to blame;
Surrender made him hang his head in shame.
His dazzling saber bespoke demonic daring;
His barded mount, wind-breathing, inspired his combat-lust.
This hero's noble name through the ages never fades,
Above Changsha, the orphan moon he shall ever chase.

After Huang Zhong was brought into the fold, Guan Yu then introduced Wei Yan to Liu Bei. But as soon as Wei Yan came in, Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to arrest him and execute him, which stunned everybody.

"Wei Yan has rendered service and done no wrong. Why do you want to kill him?" Liu Bei asked.

"To kill the lord who fed you is disloyal, and to offer up the land you call home is dishonorable," Zhuge Liang said. "I see treachery in him. He will betray us in time. That's why I want to execute him now to save us trouble in the future."

"But if you kill him, then everyone who surrenders to us would feel uneasy," Liu Bei said. "I hope you will spare him."

Since Liu Bei has spoken, Zhuge Liang relented. He pointed at Wei Yan and said, “I will spare you for now. Serve my lord loyally and do not harbor any thoughts of betrayal. If you do, I will have your head one way or another.”

So instead of the nice fat reward that he was probably expecting, poor Wei Yan just got an earful and had to feel pretty darn lucky to get off with just that, nodding in agreement with Zhuge Liang’s warning as he retired. As we will see going forward, Wei Yan is going to become a key figure over time, not to mention Zhuge Liang’s favorite punching bag.

Huang Zhong now recommended Liu Biao’s nephew, Liu Pan (2), the former governor of Changsha who had just been taking it easy as a civilian in a nearby county. Liu Bei brought him back to Changsha and put him in charge again. So Liu Bei has now conquered the four counties he set out to take, and at each place, he has either kept a member of the original management team in charge or installed someone with ties to Liu Biao, the former imperial protector of the province. Add in the fact that he’s technically helping Liu Biao’s son, Liu Qi, to run things in the province, and Liu Bei is doing a pretty good job of ingratiating himself to the locals and making a strong case for legitimacy in the province.

So now, Liu Bei basically had control of all of Jing Province. He returned to the provincial capital, stationed his commanders at all the strategic places, and renamed the spot from which he launched his sack of Nanjun, the first city he claimed after the Battle of Red Cliff, to a suitably auspicious name to mark the occasion. From then on, he found himself with plenty of money and grain, and talented men began to flood into his service. In short, life was good for Liu Bei, for the first time in a long, long time.

We’ll leave Liu Bei to enjoy the fruits of his labor for now and check in on his ally, the state of Dongwu. Zhou Yu, the commander of the Dongwu forces, had been spending the last couple episodes

recuperating in Chaisang after Zhuge Liang's underhanded theft of the city of Nanjun had ticked him off so much that he reaggravated his arrow wound. While he was recovering, Zhou Yu stationed two of his top generals, Gan Ning and Ling Tong, at the key counties of Baling (1,2) and Hanyang (4,2), where they deployed warships and awaited his command.

At the same time, the veteran general Cheng Pu led an army and the other officers to Hefei (2,2), where Sun Quan was currently bogged down in an unsuccessful siege against Cao Cao's troops under the command of Zhang Liao, one of Cao Cao's top generals. The two sides had fought about a dozen indecisive engagements, and Sun Quan had been forced to move his camp to about 15 miles away from the city. So Sun Quan was naturally happy to see Cheng Pu and company, and he personally went out to welcome them.

Lu Su, the adviser who had told Sun Quan to fight Cao Cao when almost everyone else advocated surrender, arrived ahead of Cheng Pu's forces. When he saw Lu Su approaching, Sun Quan dismounted and waited for him, which was a tremendous honor. Lu Su hurriedly dismounted as well and bowed. All the officers were rather stunned to see the deference that Sun Quan was showing to Lu Su. But they hadn't seen nothing yet. Sun Quan then asked Lu Su to get on his horse, and the two rode side by side, another tremendous honor.

"Was it recognition enough for you when I dismounted to greet you?" Sun Quan whispered to Lu Su as they rode.

"No, my lord," Lu Su answered.

"Then what would be recognition enough for you?"

"When I see your lordship's awesome virtue prevails throughout the land, when I see all nine provinces under your control, when I see imperial enterprise established and my name written down in the histories, THEN it would be enough."

So all you bootlickers out there can just quit now, because Lu Su just showed you all up and gave you a lesson on how to do it properly and with dignity. Sun Quan was so delighted by this that he rubbed his hands and laughed out loud. When they arrived in camp, he threw a big feast to welcome the new troops and discuss how to sack Hefei.

In the midst of the party, a messenger arrived bearing a letter from Zhang Liao challenging Sun Quan to battle. Upon reading the letter, Sun Quan was incensed.

“Zhang Liao pushes me too far!” he said angrily. “He heard that Cheng Pu’s reinforcement had arrived, so he sent this challenge! Well, watch me give him a fight without using the fresh troops!”

So Sun Quan ordered his army to set out at 3 a.m. that night toward Hefei. Around 7 a.m., they were halfway there when they ran into the enemy, and the two sides lined up for battle. Donning a golden helmet and a suit of golden armor, Sun Quan rode out flanked by two officers, Song (4) Qian (1) and Jia (3) Hua (2), who were wielding halberds and serving as his bodyguards.

After three rounds of battle drums, the enemy’s lines opened up to reveal three generals. In the center was Zhang Liao, to his left was Li Dian, and to his right was Yue (4) Jin (4). These three were among Cao Cao’s most veteran generals, and the fact that he stationed them at Hefei speaks to the strategic importance of this location.

Zhang Liao now rode out and challenged Sun Quan to battle. Sun Quan, gripping his spear, wanted to go out and answer the challenge himself, which was like, dude, what are you doing?! You’re the LORD of the Southlands. You DON’T go out to engage in hand-to-hand combat. Period.

Fortunately, one of Sun Quan’s top generals, Taishi Ci, beat him to the punch. Taishi Ci and Zhang Liao traded blows for about 80 bouts without a winner. While they were fighting, on Zhang Liao’s side of the field, the general Li Dian said to his comrade Yue Jin, “The man wearing the golden helmet

across the way is Sun Quan. If we capture him, it would be enough to avenge the 830,000 men we lost at Red Cliff.”

Before Li Dian had finished speaking, Yue Jin had already darted out from his line with saber in hand, flying toward Sun Quan like a bolt of lightning. When he got near, he raised his saber and brought it down with all his might. Sun Quan’s bodyguards Song (4) Qian (1) and Jia (3) Hua (2) raised their halberds to parry the blow. With a loud clang, both halberds were broken, though they did manage to block Yue Jin’s initial attack.

Sun Quan’s bodyguards now tried to attack Yue Jin with just the broken handles of their halberds. Having lost the element of surprise, Yue Jin turned and rode back toward his own lines. Song Qian (1) grabbed a spear from one of the soldiers and came after him. But across the field, Li Dian let fly an arrow, and it struck Song Qian in his heart, sending him tumbling to the ground dead.

Seeing a comrade fall behind him, Taishi Ci now gave up his duel with Zhang Liao and rode back toward Dongwu’s lines. Zhang Liao directed his men to sweep in, and the Dongwu forces fell into disarray and scattered every which way.

In the midst of this chaos, Zhang Liao spotted Sun Quan and gave chase. He was almost on top of Sun Quan when suddenly another army darted onto the scene. It was the Dongwu general Cheng Pu. These reinforcements put up a fight and rescued Sun Quan, while Zhang Liao brought his troops back inside Hefei.

So it was another setback for Sun Quan, and after he and his defeated troops trickled back into camp, he wept bitterly over the loss of his bodyguard Song Qian (1).

“My lord,” his adviser Zhang Hong (2) now spoke up, “your confidence in your own vigor led you to underestimate the enemy, and our entire army was disappointed by your rash actions. Fighting on the battlefield is your low-ranking commanders’ duty, not yours. I hope you will check the desire to display brute valor and instead hone strategies worthy of kings and hegemony. Song Qian’s death

today was the result of your underestimating the enemy. Please take greater care to keep yourself safe from now on.”

This was some pretty serious admonishment, but to his credit, Sun Quan admitted he was in the wrong and promised to change his ways. But will this lesson learned do him any good in his ongoing battle with Zhang Liao? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!