

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 92.

Last time, Liu Bei was on a roll against Cao Cao in the region of Hanzhong. First, Liu Bei's general Huang Zhong took over a series of key locations and killed one of Cao Cao's kinsmen and top generals, Xiahou Yuan. Then, when Cao Cao personally came to avenge his kinsman, Liu Bei's forces burned his provisions and sent him scurrying back to his home base.

Undaunted, Cao Cao set out once again, trying to dislodge Liu Bei from his position along the Han (4) River. Cao Cao sent the generals Xu Huang and Wang Ping to lead the vanguard and attack. When they arrived at the river, Xu Huang, the commander, ordered his troops to cross the river and line up in battle formation, but Wang Ping, his second in command, disagreed.

"If we cross the river, what will we do if we need to retreat quickly?" Wang Ping asked, pointing out that once they cross over to the other side, they will have their backs against the river, which was not a very strategically sound place to be.

Xu Huang, however, was not swayed. "The great Han general Han (2) Xin (4) once had his troops line up with their backs to the water, forcing them to fight to the death so that they may live," he said.

So what Xu Huang was referencing here was a famous battle during the founding of the Han dynasty. Han (2) Xin (4), the commander of the Han army deployed his forces with their backs against a river, which went against every rule in the book. But Han Xin was a genius, so he could throw out the book. Unfortunately, his success that day has also become a convenient excuse for many a less talented general trying to justify doing the same thing when they really, really shouldn't, and Wang Ping pointed out as much.

"When Han Xin did that, he knew the enemy was not smart enough to take advantage," Wang Ping said. "Can you say the same for the enemy generals Zhao Yun and Huang Zhong?"

Xu Huang, however, was done arguing and made an executive decision. "You will lead the infantry into battle, and watch as I break the enemy with the cavalry," he said as he ordered his men to deploy pontoons and begin crossing.

When Liu Bei got word that Xu Huang was setting up camp with his back to the river, his generals Huang Zhong and Zhao Yun both volunteered to go meet the enemy, so Liu Bei sent both of them.

"Xu Huang is pressing ahead on courage alone," Huang Zhong said to Zhao Yun. "Let's not fight him just yet. By evening, his men will be tired, and then we can each lead a battalion and attack."

Zhao Yun agreed, so they each led a battalion and set up barricades. Xu Huang's army began to challenge for combat at sunrise, but from dawn to dusk, the Shu troops made no movement. Now, Xu Huang sent his archers forward to fire at the Shu camp.

Seeing this, Huang Zhong said to Zhao Yun, "Xu Huang must be preparing to fall back. Let's get ready to strike."

He had barely finished speaking when word arrived that the rear of Xu Huang's army was indeed moving out. Now, the Shu army let loose with its war drums and battle cries as Huang Zhong dashed out from the left and Zhao Yun charged forth from the right. The pincer attack crushed Xu Huang's army, and as Xu Huang fled, countless of his soldiers were forced into the Han River and drowned, just as his second-in-command Wang Ping had feared.

Xu Huang himself was able to slip away and run back to camp on the other side of the river. As soon as he got back to camp, though, he chewed out Wang Ping.

"Why didn't you come help me when you saw my troops in danger?!" Xu Huang said angrily.

"If I had, then this camp would not be here now," Wang Ping said. "Sir, I advised you against going, but you refused to listen. That's why you lost."

Well, Xu Huang was in a sour mood, and he did not need this “I told you so” from Wang Ping. He went so far as to threaten to execute Wang Ping. Well, here’s a lesson to you: If you threaten to kill an officer, actually follow through instead of just making a hollow threat, because that very night, Wang Ping said the heck with this and led the troops under his own command in an uprising. They set Xu Huang’s camp on fire, and in the chaos, Xu Huang was forced to abandon camp and flee.

Wang Ping then crossed the river and surrendered to Liu Bei, whereupon he shared all his knowledge of the geography around the Han River. Liu Bei was delighted.

“Now that I have you, I have no doubt that I will take Hanzhong,” Liu Bei said as he appointed Wang Ping to assisting general and army guide.

Meanwhile, Xu Huang ran back to see Cao Cao and told him that Wang Ping betrayed him and surrendered to Liu Bei. This only added to Cao Cao’s already mounting aggravation, and he now personally led his army toward the Han River to take back his camp. Fearing that he would be outnumbered and trapped on the wrong side of the river, Liu Bei’s general Zhao Yun decided to fall back to the west side of the river, and the two armies now stared at each other from opposite banks.

As Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang scouted out the area, Zhuge Liang noticed that there was a dirt mound upstream that was big enough to hold about 1,000 men. This gave him an idea. Upon returning to camp, Zhuge Liang summoned Zhao Yun and told him, “Take 500 men and bring drums and horns. Go hide by the dirt mound. Around midnight or around dusk, listen for the sound of explosive from my camp as your signal. Whenever the explosive sounds, beat the drums but stay down and do not go out to fight.”

Zhao Yun accepted the order and headed off, and Zhuge Liang found a high hill from which to keep watch over Cao Cao’s camp while staying out of sight.

The next day, Cao Cao came to pick a fight, but no one from the Shu camp went out to meet his army, and not even a single arrow was fired. After a while, Cao Cao returned to camp, but that's when the real action began.

Late that night, Zhuge Liang could see from his high vantage point that Cao Cao's soldiers were blowing out their lamps and torches and settling in for a good night's rest. As soon as they lied down, however, a series of explosives sounded from the Shu camp, followed shortly thereafter by the rolling of drums and the blaring of horns. This threw Cao Cao's troops into a panic. An enemy raid must be coming! They hastily threw on their armors, grabbed their weapons, and dashed outside the camp to repel the raid. There, they saw ... no one.

Well, I guess it was just a false alarm. Let's all go back to sleep. But as soon as they had lied down again, another series of explosives went off. The earth shook and the sound of drums and horns echoed across the canyon. Well, this is not good.

And so it went, several times a night for three nights in a row. Each time, there was no attack, but if you were Cao Cao, you couldn't really take that chance and decide to ignore the next round of drums and horns. After the third night, Cao Cao had had enough, and he pulled back about 10 miles and set up camp on open ground. At least now he could get a decent night's sleep.

When Zhuge Liang saw this, he smiled and said, "Cao Cao may know military strategy, but he does not understand the art of deception." Zhuge Liang then asked Liu Bei to personally lead troops across the river and set up camp with his back to the water.

But wait, wasn't that the enemy's mistake? Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang what he was up to, and Zhuge Liang whispered a few things in his ear, because Zhuge Liang likes to move in mysterious ways.

When Cao Cao saw Liu Bei camping out with his back to the river, he grew suspicious. Surely Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang couldn't be THAT dumb, right? He decided to not wait around and find out. Instead, he

sent a message to Liu Bei, challenging him to battle. Zhuge Liang promptly accepted on his lord's behalf and said, we'll see you tomorrow.

So the next day, the two sides met midway in front of the Five Boundaries Mountain and lined up for battle. Cao Cao sat atop his horse under his command banner, flanked by two rows of dragon-and-phoenix standards. After the war drums had rolled for three rounds, Cao Cao demanded to speak to Liu Bei. Liu Bei then rode out, accompanied by Liu Feng, Meng Da, and a group of other officers from the Riverlands.

Pointing at Liu Bei with his whip, Cao Cao scolded him, "Liu Bei, you ungrateful, dishonorable traitor of the court!"

"I am a member of the House of Han!" Liu Bei shot back. "By imperial edict, I have been ordered to bring the traitor to justice. You killed the empress, made yourself king, and commandeered the imperial carriage! If that is not treason, then what is?!"

Cao Cao was like, "I don't have to stand here and listen to this. I'm the King of Wei." So he sent the general Xu Huang out to fight. Xu Huang was greeted by Liu Bei's adopted son, Liu Feng, while Liu Bei himself rode back into his own lines. Liu Feng was no match for Xu Huang, who was one of Cao Cao's best warriors, so he turned and fled. Seizing the momentum, Cao Cao told his troops: "Whoever captures Liu Bei will be the lord of the Riverlands."

With that juicy carrot dangling in front of them, Cao Cao's men roared and charged across the battlefield. The Shu soldiers turned and fled toward the Han River, abandoning their camp and littering the road with their horses and weapons. Pretty soon, Cao Cao's soldiers were busy fighting amongst themselves for booty instead of fighting the enemy.

When he saw this, Cao Cao hurriedly ordered his men to ring the gong and signal retreat.

"We're just about to capture Liu Bei," his officers said. "Why does your highness signal retreat?"

“I was already suspicious when I saw the Shu army camp with its back to the river,” Cao Cao explained. “Now, they’re leaving behind so many horses and weapons. That makes it even more suspicious. We must fall back now. Do not take any spoils.”

In fact, Cao Cao was so serious about this that he sent out word that anyone who dared to pick up a single piece of booty would be executed, and that the army was to retreat with all possible haste.

But it was too late. Before Cao Cao’s army could turn around, Zhuge Liang had raised a flag. Liu Bei now turned his troops around and charged. He was joined by a battalion on the left led by Huang Zhong, and another battalion on the right, led by Zhao Yun. This three-pronged assault put Cao Cao’s troops to flight, and Zhuge Liang ordered his soldiers to pursue through the night.

Cao Cao now ordered his troops to head toward his home base at the city of Nanzheng (2,4), but he was in for a nasty surprise. So a couple episodes ago, we mentioned that Zhuge Liang had sent the old general Yan Yan to defend the key location of Langzhong (2,1) in place of the generals Zhang Fei and Wei Yan. Well, that happened, and Zhang Fei and Wei Yan were freed up to lead separate armies to come join the fight here. But along the way, they first took advantage of Cao Cao’s absence to sack Nanzheng. And now, Cao Cao was being pursued on five sides, three from behind and two from in front. A panicked Cao Cao now turned and fled toward Yangping (2,2) Pass.

Liu Bei and his army advanced to newly conquered city of Nanzheng. After doing the usual round of handshaking to reassure the locals that they would not be massacred, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang, “Why did Cao Cao lose so quickly this time?”

“Cao Cao is suspicious by nature,” Zhuge Liang replied. “Even though he knows how to wage war, paranoia leads to many defeats. So I used decoys to defeat him.”

“Now that Cao Cao has retreated to Yangping Pass, he is completely isolated,” Liu Bei said. “How do you plan to repel him?”

“I’ve got it all mapped it out,” Zhuge Liang said. He then sent Zhang Fei and Wei Yan to each lead an army to cut off Cao Cao’s supply lines, while ordering Huang Zhong and Zhao Yun to each lead an army to go set fire to the mountains around Yangping Pass.

Holed up inside Yangping Pass, Cao Cao sent out scouts to assess the situation, and they reported back that the Shu army has blocked off all the backroads and set fire to all the woods. This puzzled Cao Cao, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it, as word soon came that Zhang Fei and Wei Yan were raiding his provisions.

“Who dares to go fight Zhang Fei?” Cao Cao asked.

His Mad Tiger general Xu Chu immediately volunteered, so Cao Cao gave him 1,000 crack troops and assigned him to convoy duty to protect the grain being transported to Yangping Pass. The officer in charge of the shipment welcomed him with relief.

“If you hadn’t come, general, this grain would not make it to Yangping Pass,” the officer said as he presented Xu Chu with wine and meat as a welcome gift.

Unfortunately for him, Xu Chu kind of took things a little too far and availed himself of a little too much wine. Then, totally ignoring the safe blood alcohol level for convoy duty, Xu Chu ordered the procession to continue.

“But it’s getting late, and the terrain ahead is treacherous,” the delivery officer said. “We shouldn’t try to cross now.”

“I am the equal of 10,000 men,” a buzzing Xu Chu said. “What do I have to fear?! Tonight, with the moonlight, is perfect for moving these provisions.”

And so Xu Chu rode out in front, leading the convoy ahead. After 9 o’clock that night, just as they were traveling, drums and horns blared from the hills, and an army blocked their path, led by none other than Zhang Fei.

Wielding his spear, Zhang Fei galloped straight for Xu Chu, who hoisted his saber and prepared for combat. But hey, guess which one of them got totally hammered earlier? Well, ok, maybe Zhang Fei did, too, but Xu Chu was the more inebriated of the two, and now he was learning why it was a bad idea to drink and ride. Within a few bouts, he took a spear thrust in the shoulder, which sent him tumbling off his horse. Fortunately for him, the wound wasn't too serious, and his men helped him up and they ran for their lives while Zhang Fei helped himself to their provisions.

So Xu Chu limped back to see Cao Cao, having totally botched convoy duty. But everybody knows Cao Cao loves Mad Tiger too much to really punish him. Instead of threats of execution, Cao Cao just sent Xu Chu off for medical attention while he personally mobilized his troops to go meet Liu Bei and settle this thing.

When the two sides lined up, Liu Bei sent out his adopted son Liu Feng to challenge for battle. This drew Cao Cao's ire.

"You sandal peddler!" he cursed Liu Bei. "How dare you keep sending out your fake son to fight? If my little yellowbeard son Cao Zhang were here, he would cut your fake son to pieces!"

Liu Feng, who probably was carrying a chip on his shoulder as the adopted son, did not take kindly to this slight. He wielded his spear and galloped toward Cao Cao. Cao Cao told Xu Huang to go take care of this little punk, and soon, Liu Feng turned and fled.

Cao Cao now ordered his troops to give chase, but suddenly, explosives sounded from all over the Shu army's camp, followed by the sound of drums and horns. And by now, Cao Cao was probably panicking every time he heard explosives followed by drums and horns, so he quickly ordered retreat. His soldiers, too, were mindful of all their recent setbacks, and they trampled each other trying to run back to Yangping Pass.



Liu Bei's forces chased Cao Cao's troops all the way to the pass, whereupon they set fire to the east and south gates while making lots of ruckus at the west and north gates. Cao Cao was forced to abandon the pass and flee, with the Shu army hot on his tail. Just as he was running, he was cut off in front by a battalion led by Zhang Fei, pursued from behind by Zhao Yun, and attacked from the side by Huang Zhong. The result was not pretty, as Cao Cao was routed and fled under the protection of his officers.

No sooner had they arrived at the border of Xie (2) Gorge did they see a dust cloud ahead as an army approached.

"If this is an enemy ambush, then I'm done for!" Cao Cao said in a panic.

But when the army got closer, Cao Cao saw that it was led by his second son, Cao Zhang (1). Now, this is the kid that Cao Cao was calling Little Yellowbeard earlier in the day. Every since he was a kid, Cao Zhang had been skilled at riding and archery. He was also uncommonly strong, so strong that he could tame ferocious beasts with his bare hands.

Despite Cao Zhang's impressive attributes, however, Tiger Dad Cao Cao had often nagged him, saying, "You prefer archery and horse-riding to studying. What's the worth of being a common fighter?"

To that, Cao Zhang answered, "A man of action ought to be like the great generals of yore, winning glory in the desert and leading hundreds of thousands of men as they traverse the empire. I couldn't stand being a scholar!"

And whenever Cao Cao asked his sons what their ambitions were, Cao Zhang always answered, "To be a general."

"What do you think that means?" Cao Cao would ask.

"It means strapping on the hard shell of armor and hefting the pointed weapon," Cao Zhang would answer. "It means facing danger without looking back; leading my men by taking the lead; making rewards unstinting and punishments true."

This answer would make Cao Cao laugh with delight.

Earlier in the year 218, the Wuhuan (1,2) Nation on the northern edge of the empire rose up in revolt, and Cao Cao sent Cao Zhang at the head of 50,000 men to put them down. On the day Cao Zhang set out, Cao Cao told him, “At home, we’re father and son, but in the field, we are lord and vassal. The law is blind. Take my word to heart.”

Cao Zhang did not disappoint. When he arrived in the north, he led from the front and pacified the region. After that, he heard that Cao Cao was losing at Yangping Pass, so he came to help. So now, when Cao Cao saw this impressive warrior son, he was delighted.

“My Little Yellowbeard is here; now I will defeat Liu Bei for sure!” Cao Cao said. And so he regrouped his army and turned around, setting up the mouth of Xie (2) Gorge.

When Liu Bei got word that Cao Zhang had arrived to reinforce Cao Cao, he asked which officer dared to go meet the new guy. His adopted son Liu Feng and the general Meng Da both stepped up, so Liu Bei sent them both, each with 5,000 troops. Liu Feng led the way, while Meng Da brought up the rear.

When they ran into Cao Zhang, it only took Liu Feng three bouts to realize he was no match for Yellowbeard, so he turned and fled. Meng Da now came up from behind and was just about to fight Cao Zhang when suddenly, the enemy troops fell into disarray. This, it turns out, was the doing of the Shu generals Ma Chao and Wu (2) Lan (2), attacking with two battalions. These new troops were fresh as they hadn’t done any fighting yet, so they were unstoppable. Meng Da now also piled on with his troops, and Cao Zhang’s soldiers took flight.

In the midst of this melee, Cao Zhang did manage to score a small victory. He ran into the enemy officer Wu Lan, and within a few bouts, Cao Zhang killed Wu Lan with a thrust of his halberd. After the two sides scrummed for a while, Cao Cao called his troops back to camp.

The two sides now engaged in a bit of a stalemate. Cao Cao's army was sitting at the mouth of the gorge for days. He wanted to attack, but Ma Chao was there to repel him. He thought about calling off the campaign and going home, but was afraid the enemy would laugh at him.

Just as Cao Cao was wrestling with this dilemma, his attendant brought him some chicken soup. In the bowl, there was a piece of chicken ribs, and the sight of that brought a thought to Cao Cao's mind. Just as he was contemplating that thought, his old warhorse Xiahou Dun came in to ask what the password was for that night. I guess the password was used to verify that the person you came across was actually your comrade rather than a spy.

Without thinking, Cao Cao muttered, "Chicken ribs; chicken ribs."

Well, ok then. Xiahou Dun dutifully relayed this password to his officers. When the secretary Yang Xiu (1) received the password, he immediately instructed his attendants to begin packing up their stuff and prepare for a journey home.

When someone reported this to Xiahou Dun, he was alarmed because, hey, who told you guys we were going home? So he went to Yang Xiu's tent and asked him why he was packing up.

"Tonight's password is a clear indication that his highness will soon retreat," Yang Xiu explained. "Chicken ribs have no meat, and yet one relishes them for their flavor. Right now, if we advance, we cannot win; if we retreat, we're afraid of being laughed at. There's no point in staying here, so why not leave? His highness will no doubt call off this war soon, so I'm packing up now so that we won't be caught unprepared when the time comes."

"Sir, you really understand his highness's mind!" Xiahou Dun said in admiration. So he now too began to pack his stuff, and soon, just about everyone in camp was doing the same.

That night, Cao Cao was feeling rather unsteady and could not sleep. So he decided to grab a hand axe and go for a stroll around camp. When he came to Xiahou Dun's camp, he saw that all the soldiers

were packing up their stuff. Alarmed, Cao Cao returned to his tent and summoned Xiahou Dun to ask him what's going on.

"Secretary Yang Xiu guessed your highness's intent to return to the capital," Xiahou Dun said.

So now Cao Cao summoned Yang Xiu, who repeated his explanation. But now, Cao Cao flew into a rage.

"How dare you spread rumors and damage my men's morale?!" Cao Cao said angrily as he ordered the guards to drag Yang Xiu outside and behead him. He then had the head displayed by the gates as a warning to all.

So at this point, I should pause for a minute and explain that there's a bit of history between Yang Xiu and Cao Cao. This Yang Xiu, whom we've met a couple times before, was a free spirit who thought highly of his own talents and was never one to pass up an opportunity to show it off, and in doing so, he had run afoul of Cao Cao on more than one occasion. The novel goes into quite a bit of detail about these incidents. Since we're already coming up on the customary length for an episode, and to avoid too much digression in the narrative, I'm going to leave out those details here and cover them in a supplemental episode that I'll put out in the near future.

In any case, Yang Xiu's head was now hanging by the camp gates, but Cao Cao wasn't content to stop there. He now turned his ire toward Xiahou Dun for following Yang Xiu's suggestion that he start packing, and Cao Cao called for the guards to put Xiahou Dun to the blade as well. Everyone else begged for leniency, and of course, Cao Cao was just kidding anyway, since he wasn't really going to axe his veteran commander and kinsman. After letting Xiahou Dun off with a tongue-lashing, Cao Cao turned his attention to the stalemate at hand. No more of this chicken ribs nonsense, he decided. It was time to take action.

To see what action Cao Cao decides to take, and how it will pan out for him, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Oh wait, not the next episode, because that is our 100th episode question and answer session. I can't wait. I've gotten a lot of good questions, and I hope I have some good answers for you.

So next week is my regular week off, and I'll be using that to finish up work on the Q&A. Tune in two weeks from now for the 100th episode Q&A extravaganza, and tune in the week after that to pick up where we left off in the story. I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!