

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 72.

Last time, Cao Cao had killed Ma Teng, a longtime adversary. In response, Ma Teng's eldest son, Ma Chao, had mobilized the troops of the western outpost of Xiliang and was marching toward the heartland to do the "you killed my father, prepare to die" thing. With a little trickery, he took the former capital city of Chang'an and was now encroaching on the key strategic location of Tong (2) Pass.

Cao Cao sent two of his top officers, Cao Hong and Xu Huang, to defend the pass. He told them they just had to hold it for 10 days while he mobilized the main army. But on the ninth day, after listening to the enemy call his ancestors all sorts of nasty names for eight days, Cao Hong's temper got the better of him, and while Xu Huang's back was turned, he charged out with 3,000 men to take on the enemy.

When the Xiliang troops saw Cao Hong charging toward them, they abandoned their horses and weapons and fled, which induced Cao Hong to give chase. While this was happening, Xu Huang, who was inspecting provisions when Cao Hong decided to go out to fight, had heard what was happening. Alarmed, Xu Huang immediately led a detachment of troops and came looking for Cao Hong, shouting for him to turn back.

But alas, it was too late. Just then, cries of battle rose up behind them and shook the ground. Ma Chao's cousin Ma Dai (4) charged onto the scene with an army. Cao Hong and Xu Huang, recognizing that they had fallen for a ruse, turned and ran. But a signal sounded, and from behind a hill came two detachments of enemy soldiers, led by Ma Chao on the left and his commandant Pang De on the right. The two sides scrummed, and Cao Hong ended up losing more than half of his men.

Seeing the tide of battle turn against them, Cao Hong and Xu Huang fought their way out and fled back to the pass. But the Xiliang troops were hot on their tail, so hot, in fact, that Cao Hong and

company could not hold their ground and had to abandon the pass. Pang De kept chasing them until he ran into reinforcements led by Cao Cao's kinsman Cao Ren. While Cao Ren rescued Cao Hong and Xu Huang, Pang De returned to the pass to celebrate with Ma Chao.

When Cao Cao saw Cao Hong, he was furious.

"I told you that you must hold the pass for 10 days. Why did you lose it after nine days?!"

"The Xiliang troops were insulting us," Cao Hong answered. "I saw that their ranks were disorganized, so I attacked, but who knew it was a trick."

Cao Cao now turned to Xu Huang and admonished him. "Cao Hong is young and impatient, but you should know better!"

"I tried time and again to advise him against fighting," Xu Huang said. "But he won't listen. I was inspecting provisions when he went out. By the time I found out, he was already out there. I was worried something would happen to him, so I rushed out, but by then, he had already fallen for the trap."

When he heard this, Cao Cao was so angry that he wanted to execute Cao Hong. Fortunately for Cao Hong, all the other officers begged for leniency, and Cao Cao backed off. Cao Hong got an earful before being dismissed.

Cao Cao then marched his troops to outside Tong (2) Pass. There, he ordered his men to cut down trees and make camp. The next day, he marched out with all his officers to attack the pass. On their way, they ran into Ma Chao's forces coming their way, so both sides lined up for battle.

Sitting atop his horse under his banner, Cao Cao looked across the way and saw how stout all the soldiers of Xiliang looked. Ma Chao was even more impressive. His visage was light and his lips red. His waist was slender and his shoulders broad. His voice was powerful and his physique vigorous. Donning

a white robe with silver armor, Ma Chao gripped a long spear and sat atop his horse in front of his lines, flanked by Pang De and Ma Dai.

Secretly impressed by the sight of Ma Chao, Cao Cao rode forth and addressed him.

“You are the descendant of a famous general of the Han. Why have you rebelled?”

Umm, dude, I’ll give you one guess.

“Cao Cao, you traitor!” Ma Chao cursed through gritted teeth. “You have oppressed your sovereign, a crime for which execution would be too light a punishment! You have killed my father and brothers, a wrong that cannot go unavenged! I will capture you alive and eat your flesh!”

At that, Ma Chao galloped toward Cao Cao. From behind Cao Cao, the general Yu (1) Jin (4) rode forth to meet him. After just eight or nine bouts, Yu Jin could not hold his own and ran back to his own lines. He was followed by the general Zhang He (2), who fared a little better, lasting about 20 bouts before fleeing in defeat. Next came the officer Li (3) Tong (1). By now, Ma Chao’s blood was up, and within a few bouts, his spear found its mark, and Li Tong (1) fell dead off his horse.

Seizing the momentum, Ma Chao gave a wave with his spear, and the Xiliang troops swarmed forward. Cao Cao’s army was routed by their hard-charging foe, and both flanks caved in. Ma Chao, Pang De, and Ma Dai led about 100 riders and darted into the enemy lines looking for Cao Cao.

Amidst the chaos, Cao Cao could hear the Xiliang troops shouting, “Cao Cao is the one in the red cloak!” So he quickly threw off his red cloak.

But just then, he heard them shout again, “Cao Cao is the one with the long beard!” Panicked, Cao Cao pulled out his dagger and gave himself a quick shave.

But when Ma Chao got wind of this, he told his men to shout, “Cao Cao is the one with the short beard!” At this, Cao Cao cut off a corner of a banner and used it to cover his chin as he fled, because, you know, that is SO much less conspicuous than a short beard.

But as he fled, he could hear a rider in pursuit. He turned and looked, and it was none other than Ma Chao. This threw Cao Cao into a panic, and his entourage, seeing Ma Chao coming their way, scattered and ran for their lives, leaving Cao Cao to fend for himself.

“Cao Cao, don’t you dare run away!” Ma Chao shouted.

Cao Cao was so scared that he dropped his whip. Soon, Ma Chao caught up and thrust with his spear. Just then, Cao Cao did a U-turn around a tree, and Ma Chao’s spear found the trunk of the tree instead of Cao Cao’s back. By the time Ma Chao pulled his spear out of the tree, Cao Cao had put some distance between them.

Ma Chao wasn’t about to give up that easily. He resumed his pursuit, but when he got close again, an enemy officer appeared from behind a hill and shouted, “Do not harm my master! Here comes Cao Hong!”

So Cao Hong galloped forth and engaged Ma Chao in battle, allowing Cao Cao to escape. As for Cao Hong, after about 50 bouts, he was starting to fade. Fortunately for him, his comrade Xiahou Yuan (1) arrived on the scene with a few dozen riders just then. Ma Chao was by himself and figured the odds were not in his favor, so he turned and ran, and Xiahou Yuan was content to let him go instead of giving chase.

When Cao Cao returned to camp, he found that his army actually did not come out of that day’s battle too badly off, thanks to his general Cao Ren, who put up a dogged fight at the camp to fend off the enemy. Cao Cao sat down in his tent and sighed, “If I had executed Cao Hong, I would have died by Ma Chao’s hand today!” So he summoned Cao Hong and rewarded him handsomely.

Cao Cao then regrouped his troops and told them to fortify their defenses. Ma Chao came to the camp every day looking for a fight, but Cao Cao just told his men to stand guard instead of going out to fight, and that anyone who acted rashly would be executed.

“The Xiliang troops use long spears; we should counter with bows and arrows,” Cao Cao’s officers said to him.

“Whether we fight or not is up to me, not the enemy,” Cao Cao said. “They may have long spears, but they cannot reach us. Just sit tight and watch; the enemy will retreat on their own.”

But this response made his officers chatter amongst themselves.

“The prime minister has always led from the front in all the battles. Why has he gone soft after the defeat against Ma Chao?”

They soon had another cause for puzzlement. A few days passed, and Cao Cao’s spies reported back that Ma Chao had gained another 20,000 fresh troops, all of them soldiers from the Jiang tribes. When he heard this, Cao Cao was ecstatic.

“Why is your excellency delighted by news that Ma Chao has been reinforced?” his officers asked.

“I will explain after I have won,” Cao Cao told them.

Three days later, word came that Ma Chao had gained even more troops, and Cao Cao was so happy that he threw a banquet in his tent to celebrate, which made his men snicker under their breath.

“Sirs, you are all laughing at me for not having any ideas for defeating Ma Chao, so what suggestions do you have?” Cao Cao asked them.

His general Xu Huang spoke up.

“All of our troops are here, and all of the enemy’s troops are in the pass. But there must be no defenses on the river to the west of here. We can send an army to secretly cross the river and cut off the enemy’s path of retreat, and your excellency can attack them from north of the river. This way, the enemy will be cut off and in dire straits.”

“My thoughts exactly!” Cao Cao said. So he ordered Xu Huang and another officer, Zhu (1) Ling (2), to take 4,000 men to the west side of the river to stage an ambush in the canyon, where they will strike at the same time that Cao Cao crossed to the north side of the river and attacked.

Cao Cao then ordered Cao Hong to prepare ships to cross the river while leaving Cao Ren to defend the camp. Cao Cao himself was to personally lead the troops across the river.

Ma Chao’s spies soon brought word of this plan to him.

“Instead of attacking the pass, Cao Cao is preparing ships,” Ma Chao said to Han Sui. “He must be trying to cross to the north side of the river to attack our rear. I will lead a detachment of troops to the north bank to stop them from crossing. Within 20 days, when their provisions run out, Cao Cao’s army will fall into disarray, and you can attack them along the south bank of the river, and Cao Cao will be ours.”

“There’s no need to do that,” Han Sui said. “Have you not heard of the military strategy of attacking the enemy while they are crossing a river? Just wait for Cao Cao’s troops to be midway across the river, and then attack them from the south bank. Cao Cao’s troops will be killed in the water.”

Ma Chao liked this idea even better, so he sent out scouts to find out when Cao Cao planned to cross the river.

On the day of the crossing, Cao Cao divided his troops into thirds and marched them to the bank of the river. It was about daybreak when they arrived, and Cao Cao sent his best troops across first to begin building a camp on the opposite shore. Cao Cao himself led about 100 bodyguards and sat on the south bank, where he observed the crossing with his hand on his sword.

Suddenly, someone reported, “A general in white robes is approaching from our rear!”

Everyone in Cao Cao's ranks knew that this was Ma Chao, and they were in no mood to stick around. So all the soldiers swarmed onto the ships, and of course there were way more men than ships, and the scene on the river bank became total chaos.

Cao Cao, however, remained seated and did not budge. With his hand still on his sword, he pointed and ordered his troops to settle down, but to no avail. Men were shouting, horses were neighing, and it was every man for himself as his soldiers swarmed toward the ships like bees.

Just then, an officer leaped from a ship onto shore and shouted, "The enemy is approaching! Your excellency, please board the ship!"

Cao Cao looked and saw that this was his trusted warrior Xu Chu. But Cao Cao still wasn't about to budge.

"So what if the enemy is approaching?" Cao Cao said.

He found out about the "so what" part soon enough. As he was speaking, he turned around and saw that Ma Chao was within 100 paces of him. At this point, it wasn't up to Cao Cao anymore. Xu Chu dragged him toward a boat, which was by now more than 7 feet from the shore. But no matter. Xu Chu, with Cao Cao in tow, bounded onto the boat in one mighty leap.

Cao Cao's entourage, however, all waded into the water and were grabbing onto the side of the boat trying to pull themselves aboard. They were pulling so fiercely that the small boat was about to capsize. So Xu Chu pulled out his knife and started hacking away indiscriminately, cutting off hands and fingers left and right and leaving countless crippled men drowning in the water.

With the boat freed of any hangers-on, Xu Chu now steered it downstream as he pushed the boat along with a wooden pole while Cao Cao crouched by his feet for shelter. When Ma Chao reached the river bank, he saw that the boat was midway across, so he and his men immediately began firing arrows at it. On the boat, Xu Chu kept one hand on the pole to push the boat along and held up a saddle with the other hand to shield Cao Cao from the arrows.

But while Cao Cao was relatively safe, the other people on the boat weren't so lucky. Every one of Ma Chao's shots found its target and send them tumbling into the water. By the time he was done, the few dozen men in the boat, aside from Cao Cao and Xu Chu, had all been hit. Without someone to man the rudder, the boat started to spin around in the middle of the river.

This, though, was no problem for Xu Chu. Summoning his superhuman strength, he tucked the rudder between his legs to hold it steady, used one hand to push the boat along with the wooden pole, and used the other hand to keep the saddle over Cao Cao to shield him from arrows as they made their way across the river.

While all this was going on, the governor of a nearby county loyal to Cao Cao was watching from the southern hills. When he saw that Cao Cao was in danger, he quickly told his men to drive all the horses and cattle from their own camps onto the hillside. When Ma Chao's soldiers saw this, they forgot about chasing Cao Cao and instead turned around to claim their share of the cattle. This allowed Cao Cao to make it across to the north bank.

Once across, Cao Cao made sure to sink his boat so that it could not be used by the enemy to come after him. By the time his other officers had heard about his plight and came to rescue him, he had already come ashore. Xu Chu, meanwhile, was riddled with arrows, but fortunately for him, he was wearing a suit of heavy armor that kept the arrows from going through. Cao Cao's officers escorted him to their camp on the north bank and then prostrated before him and asked how he was doing.

"I almost got trapped by that little scoundrel today," Cao Cao said with a laugh.

"If not for someone releasing cattle and horses on the hillside to distract the rebels, they would have come after us with all their might," Xu Chu said.



Cao Cao found out who it was that had done him that favor, and he rewarded that governor handsomely. Cao Cao then turned his attention to keeping the enemy at bay. He sent out his generals to picket the corridor along the river and make a temporary barrier. If Ma Chao's troops try to encroach, Cao Cao's men were to post battle banners behind the pickets to serve as decoys. His men also dug trenches along the bank of the river and covered them with reeds and brush, with the idea of luring the enemy there.

Meanwhile, in the enemy camp, Ma Chao met with Han Sui and told him, "I almost captured Cao Cao today, but one of his generals valiantly carried him onto a boat. I wonder who that was."

"I've heard that Cao Cao has an elite squad of warriors around him called the Tiger Guard," Han Sui said. "These men were led by the generals Dian (3) Wei (2) and Xu Chu. Dian Wei is dead, so the one who rescued Cao Cao must be Xu Chu. He possesses exceptional strength and courage. Everyone calls him the Mad Tiger. If you run into him, do not underestimate him."

"I have long heard of that name, too," Ma Chao said.

The two of them then turned their thoughts to strategy.

"Now that Cao Cao has crossed the river, he will attack our rear," Han Sui said. "We must attack him quickly, before he has a chance to set up his camp. Once his camp is set, it would be difficult to clear him out."

"My preference would still be to just hold the northern bank so that he cannot cross the river," Ma Chao said.

"How about if you guard our camp, while I lead troops along the river bank and face off against Cao Cao?" Han Sui suggested.

Ma Chao agreed with that idea and sent his general Pang De to serve as Han Sui's vanguard. So Han Sui and Pang De led 50,000 men and headed toward Cao Cao's location. Of course, Cao Cao had

already laid down a trap for them in the form of covered trenches. Pang De and his vanguard of 1,000 armored cavalry led the charge, but no sooner had their cries rose, their men and horses fell into the trenches.

But this was no trouble for Pang De. With one bound, he leaped out of the trench and started hacking down enemy soldiers while he broke through their ranks on foot. At this point, Han Sui, who was charging in behind Pang De's vanguard, had been surrounded by Cao Cao's forces. No matter. Pang De strolled over to rescue him. Along the way, he cut down an enemy lieutenant and took his horse. He then carved out a bloody path, rescued Han Sui, and fled toward the southeast.

Cao Cao's troops gave chase, but by now, Ma Chao was coming with reinforcements and fought them off. So despite walking into a trap, Ma Chao managed to salvage the better part of the force he had sent. The battle lasted until dark, and when Ma Chao tallied up his casualties, he found that two of his lieutenants had been killed, and about 200-some soldiers had died in the trenches.

But just because he suffered a setback, Ma Chao wasn't about to go away. Instead, he and Han Sui talked about taking the fight to Cao Cao again.

"If we delay and allow Cao Cao to entrench on the north side of the river, it will be difficult to defeat him," Ma Chao said. "Why don't we lead some light cavalry and raid his camps tonight?"

"We should go in separately so that we can help each other," Han Sui said.

So Ma Chao decided to lead the force in the front and told Pang De and his cousin Ma Dai to lead the reinforcements in the back. And they set out that night.

As for Cao Cao, he gathered his troops to the north of the Wei (4) River and summoned his officers.

“The rebels will no doubt try to raid our camp before we can entrench,” he said to them. “Let’s set up ambushes all around and keep up appearances in the center of the army. When you hear the explosive, that’d be your signal to spring the trap, and we will capture the rebels in one fell swoop.”

That night, Ma Chao sent a lieutenant on ahead with 30 riders to scout out the enemy camps. When this lieutenant saw that there were no defenses, he and his men dashed into the heart of the camps, and straight into the trap. When Cao Cao’s men saw that an enemy force crash into their midst, they sounded the alarm, and all the hidden troops jumped out and attacked. The lieutenant met a quick end at the hands of Cao Cao’s general Xiahou Yuan (1), but Cao Cao had sprung his trap and managed to encircle only 30 riders.

Now it was Ma Chao’s turn to spring a surprise. He, along with Pang De and Ma Dai, led the bulk of their forces and attacked from three directions. The two sides scrummed in the dark of the night until daybreak and both sides decided to call it a day.

That encounter was just the beginning of the fighting. Ma Chao now stationed troops at the mouth of the Wei River and sent his army to harass Cao Cao morning, day, and night. Cao Cao linked some boats and rafts together to build three pontoon bridges that connected to the south bank of the river. His general Cao Ren then built camps on both sides of the river and used his freight wagons to build a barrier.

When Ma Chao heard about this development, though, he told his men to each take a bundle of straw and bring along some firestarting material. He and Han Sui then led their army, fought their way to the front of Cao Ren’s camp, and set the place on fire. Cao Cao’s troops couldn’t hold their ground, so they abandoned the camp and fled. The wagons and the pontoon bridges were all reduced to ashes. So now Ma Chao held the river.

Cao Cao was now worried about his army's inability to establish a fortified position. His adviser Xun You (1) suggested that they use the soil and sand from the river to build a wall, so Cao Cao dispatched 30,000 men to tackle that project. But now Ma Chao sent Pang De and Ma Dai to each lead 500 cavalry and make sudden attacks to hamper their progress. On top of that, the soil and sand from the river were rather loose, and as soon as they were piled up, they would collapse.

Cao Cao was now at his wit's end. It was the end of September, and it was bitterly cold. Dense clouds covered the sky day after day. One day, while Cao Cao was brooding in his tent, his men reported that an old man was there to request an audience with him.

Cao Cao summoned him in, and this old man was thin and angular like a crane and craggy and austere like a pine tree. Cao Cao talked with him and found out that he was a recluse in the nearby mountains. His Daoist name was "The Hermit who Dreams of Plum Blossoms," but his name was really beside the point for our purposes.

Cao Cao treated the old man as an honored guest, and the old man said, "Your excellency has long been trying to fortify both sides of the river. Is this not the ideal moment to do so?"

"The soil is too loose. We cannot build a wall with it," Cao Cao said. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Your excellency has divine mastery of military affairs, how can you not recognize opportunities presented by the climate? It has been overcast for days, and when the first gales from the north begin to blow, everything will freeze. Once that happens, have your men pile up soil and pour water over it. By morning, your wall will be built."

Cao Cao smacked himself on the forehead like, "That's right!" He wanted to reward the old man handsomely for this helpful reminder, but the old man refused and left. That night, strong winds from the north kicked up, and Cao Cao ordered all his men to start piling up soil and pour water over it. They did not have any vessels with which to carry water, so they used water-tight silk pouches

instead. The soil was freezing as it was being piled up, and by morning, the frozen soil wall was complete.

Ma Chao's spies soon reported this development, and when Ma Chao led his men out to take a look, he was stunned and thought that Cao Cao had the help of the gods. But undeterred, the next day, Ma Chao and his forces advanced on Cao Cao's fortifications. Cao Cao personally rode out to meet them, accompanied only by one man, his general Xu Chu.

"I, Cao Cao, have come alone to speak with Ma Chao," Cao Cao said as he waved his whip.

Ma Chao rode out with spear in hand to see what Cao Cao had to say.

"You thought I couldn't fortify my camp. But I have done it in one night. Why don't you surrender now?!" Cao Cao said.

Ma Chao was not amused by this suggestion and was just about to ride forward to capture Cao Cao when he noticed that, contrary to what he had said, Cao Cao did not come alone. Behind him was a man who glared at him with monstrous, wide eyes and appeared ready to charge with saber in hand.

So, if Ma Chao and Xu Chu go head to head, who would emerge victorious? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.