

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 73.

Before we pick up where we left off, I should note that the show just celebrated its second anniversary a couple days ago. The introduction episode was published on April 9, 2014, and the first actual episode went up exactly two years ago today. Thank you to everyone who has listened to the podcast, rated it in iTunes, recommended it to a friend, and made a donation to support it. You guys have made this a great ride, and I'm looking forward to the next two years.

So last time, after numerous unsuccessful attempts, Cao Cao finally managed to build a fortified camp on the Wei (4) River against Ma Chao, thanks to some freezing weather that allowed him to build a dirt-and-ice wall. This done, he went out to taunt his enemy about it. Ma Chao did not take kindly to this and was just about to charge at Cao Cao when he noticed an imposing figure behind Cao Cao.

Ma Chao suspected that this might be Xu Chu, the so-called Mad Tiger he had heard about. So he pointed with his whip and asked, "I have heard that your army has a Tiger Lord. Where is he?"

"I AM Xu Chu!" the man behind Cao Cao shouted. Supernatural light seemed to shoot from his eyes, and his air was so imposing that Ma Chao dared not make a move against Cao Cao. Instead, he simply turned his horse around and returned to camp. Cao Cao and Xu Chu also returned to their camp, and men on both sides were in awe of Xu Chu's presence.

"Even the rebels know General Xu as the Tiger Lord," Cao Cao said to his officers. So from that point on, everyone in Cao Cao's army also referred to Xu Chu as such.

Impressive nicknames were nice, but there was still a battle to be fought, and Xu Chu said to Cao Cao, "I will capture Ma Chao tomorrow."

"Ma Chao is very valiant; you must not underestimate him," Cao Cao cautioned.

“I vow to fight him to the death!” Xu Chu replied.

So Cao Cao sent a message to Ma Chao, informing him that the Tiger Lord is challenging him to single combat the next day. Ma Chao, never one to shy away from a fight, was incensed when he read the letter.

“How dare you disrespect me so?! I swear I will slay the Mad Tiger tomorrow!”

So the duel was on. The next day, both sides lined up in battle formation. Ma Chao told his general Pang De to anchor his left wing, while his cousin Ma Dai anchored the right and Han Sui, his father’s sworn brother, watched over the center.

Ma Chao, hoisting his spear atop his horse, stood in front of the lines and shouted, “Mad Tiger, get out here now!”

Seeing this, Cao Cao turned and said to his men, “Ma Chao’s valor is on par with Lü Bu’s!”

But Xu Chu was not impressed. Before Cao Cao had finished speaking, Xu Chu was already galloping out to answer the challenge, and he and Ma Chao threw themselves at each other. They hacked and thrust at each other for 100-some bouts without a winner. Both of their horses were exhausted after this long duel, so they both returned to their lines, switched horses, and came back out, whereupon they hacked and thrust at each other for another 100-some bouts without a winner.

At this point, Xu Chu’s blood was up. He called for a quick timeout, galloped back to his lines, took off his helmet and armor, and stripped to the waist, showing off his muscular physique. Now remember we’re in the midst of a cold spell so severe that Cao Cao was able to build a fortification out of frozen dirt, and here was Xu Chu, going back out to fight half-naked. Now THAT’s hardcore.

As Xu Chu and Ma Chao tangled again, both armies watched breathlessly. After another 30-some bouts, Xu Chu took a mighty swing at Ma Chao. Ma Chao dodged this blow and countered with a thrust of his spear toward Xu Chu's chest. Xu Chu tossed his saber aside and grabbed the spear with his bare hands, and the two of them now engaged in a tug-of-war on their horses. Xu Chu had the greater brute strength, and with a loud crack, he snapped the spear in half. So he and Ma Chao each grabbed half of a spear and swung it at each other atop their horses.

Now, Cao Cao was starting to worry about Xu Chu, so he ordered his generals Xiahou Yuan and Cao Hong to go out and gang up on Ma Chao. Seeing this, the generals Pang De and Ma Dai dashed out from Ma Chao's lines with their army in tow and swept across the field. Cao Cao's troops were thrown into disarray, and Xu Chu himself took two arrows to the arm. Cao Cao's forces scurried back behind their fortifications, and Ma Chao chased them all the way to the river.

This melee cost Cao Cao more than half of his troops, and Cao Cao now ordered his men to just fortify their defenses instead of going out to give battle.

Meanwhile, Ma Chao returned to his camp at the mouth of the river and said to Han Sui, "I have never seen a fighter as vicious as Xu Chu. He really is a Mad Tiger."

While Xu Chu probably was itching to go back out and fight another 300 bouts with Ma Chao, Cao Cao had other ideas. Namely, he wanted to defeat Ma Chao with cunning instead of brute force, and obviously Xu Chu was not the man to turn to for that. Instead, Cao Cao secretly dispatched the generals Xu Huang and Zhu Ling (2) to cross over to the west side of the river and set up camp so that they could attack Ma Chao from two sides.

One day, Ma Chao led a few hundred cavalry to outside Cao Cao's camp, where they galloped back and forth in a display of strength. Cao Cao observed this from atop his wall. After watching for a

while, he suddenly threw his headgear to the ground and said, “If Ma Chao doesn’t die, I would have no place to be buried!”

When his general Xiahou Yuan heard this, he flew into a rage and cried out, “I would rather die here if it meant exterminating that rebel!”

And so Xiahou Yuan called up the thousand or so men under his command, threw open the gates of the camp, and stormed out to fight. Unable to stop them, Cao Cao was worried about his general, so he quickly mounted his horse and followed.

When Ma Chao saw the enemy coming, he ordered his front column to convert to the rear guard, and his rear guard to turn and serve as the front column. With his troops spread out in a line, Ma Chao waited for Xiahou Yuan to arrive and then rode forward to take him on. But soon, Ma Chao noticed Cao Cao amid the chaos, so he ditched Xiahou Yuan and made straight for Cao Cao. Alarmed, Cao Cao quickly turned and fled, while his troops fell into disarray.

Ma Chao was giving chase, but then his men reported that a squad of Cao Cao’s troops had set up camp on the west side of the river. Taken aback, Ma Chao did not dare to continue the pursuit and instead hurried back to camp to consult with Han Sui.

“Now that Cao Cao has sneaked over to the west side of the river, we are threatened from front and back. What should we do?” Ma Chao asked.

Several of his lieutenants advocated negotiating a temporary truce so that both sides could retreat for the winter and then make other plans come spring. Han Sui was also on board with this idea, so Ma Chao acquiesced and sent a messenger to Cao Cao to suggest a truce. Cao Cao sent the messenger back with word that he will deliver a response the next day.

After Ma Chao’s messenger departed, one of Cao Cao’s advisers, Jia (2) Xu (3), came to inquire what his intentions were.

“What do you think?” Cao Cao asked.

“In war, there is no such thing as too much deceit,” Jia Xu answered. “We can agree to a truce and then use some trickery to sow distrust between Han Sui and Ma Chao. Then we can defeat them in one fell swoop.”

“Great minds think alike,” Cao Cao said as he clapped. “Your suggestion matches my thoughts exactly.”

So Cao Cao sent a message to Ma Chao saying that if Ma Chao would allow him time to pull back, he would relinquish the west bank of the river. At the same time, he instructed his men to build pontoon bridges to make it look like they were getting ready to pull out.

When Ma Chao got the message, he said to Han Sui, “Even though Cao Cao is offering truce, he is crafty and unpredictable. If we’re not prepared, we could fall into his hands. Let’s take turns. Today you keep an eye on Cao Cao while I watch Xu Huang. Tomorrow, I will watch Cao Cao and you watch Xu Huang. That way, we will guard against deception on either end.”

Han Sui agreed and they proceeded according to plan.

Word of this quickly reached Cao Cao, and Cao Cao turned to the adviser Jia Xu and said, “Success is mine!”

He then asked his scouts, “Who is watching my side tomorrow?”

His scouts told him it was going to be Han Sui. So the next day, Cao Cao rode out with his officers, with his entourage forming a ring around him. Most of the soldiers in Han Sui’s army had never seen Cao Cao, but they of course had heard plenty about him. So many of them stepped out of their lines to get a better look at the man, the myth, the legend.

“You want to see Lord Cao, do you?” Cao Cao shouted to them. “I am human, too, not some supernatural being. I’m just smarter than most, that’s all.”

Despite Cao Cao's humble brag, all of Han Sui's soldiers were a little intimidated. Cao Cao now sent someone to the opposite lines to ask Han Sui for a word.

So Han Sui rode out from his lines. He saw that Cao Cao was not wearing any armor, so he, too, took off his armor and went out to meet him. With their horses' heads touching, the two men sat in their saddles and spoke to each other.

"General," Cao Cao said, "your father and I were cited for being filial and honest in the same year, and he was ever like an uncle to me."

I'm going to interrupt Cao Cao to insert a quick explanation here about what it meant to be cited for being filial and honest. This was referring to one of the ways of discovering potential talent for government positions during the Han dynasty. The way it worked was that for every 200,000 households, one person was to be nominated for government service. The criteria for nomination included knowledge, but also filial piety and honest conduct. Basically, if you wanted to enter government service during the Han dynasty, you had to have been cited for being filial and honest. So basically, Cao Cao was saying that both he and Han Sui's father both began their careers in the same year.

So anyway, let's get back to Cao Cao and Han Sui's conversation.

"Moreover," Cao Cao continued, "you and I have both served the emperor. The years have flown by. How old are you now, general?"

"Forty already," Han Sui answered.

"Those days in the capital, oh how young we were then," Cao Cao said. "Who could have expected that middle age would come so fast? If only the world could be at peace. Then we could enjoy each other's company!"

And so Cao Cao went on, reminiscing about the good ol' days and making no mention at all of their current conflict. At the end of a conversation that lasted about two hours, Cao Cao laughed out loud, and then he and Han Sui bid each other goodbye and returned to their respective camps.

Word of what transpired quickly reached Ma Chao, and he hurried over to ask Han Sui, "What did Cao Cao speak to you about on the battlefield today?"

"He was just reminiscing about the old days when we were both in the capital," Han Sui answered.

Ma Chao was kind of like, yeah right.

"How could you have not spoken of military affairs?" he pressed Han Sui.

"Cao Cao did not make any mention of it, so why would I?" Han Sui said.

But Ma Chao was unsurprisingly skeptical, and he left without saying anything more.

As for Cao Cao, after he returned to camp, he said to Jia Xu, "Sir, do you understand the intent behind my conversation on the battlefield?"

"It's a brilliant idea," Jia Xu said, "but it's still not enough to turn Ma Chao and Han Sui against each other. I have a scheme that would put them at each other's throat.

"Ma Chao is but a brute and does not understand strategy. Your excellency can write a letter to Han Sui in your own hand. Put something vague in the letter, and in the key places, smear and blotch out some words and write over others. Send this letter to Han Sui and make sure Ma Chao knows about it. Ma Chao would no doubt demand to see it. When he sees that all the important passages have been smeared and revised, he would suspect that Han Sui must have done it to conceal something. This would confirm his suspicion about your battlefield conversation, and that suspicion

will lead to chaos. I will also secretly connect with Han Sui's officers and sow discord between them and Ma Chao. Then Ma Chao will be ours."

Cao Cao loved this idea and immediately did as Jia Xu suggested, writing a vague letter and blotching out some key phrases. He then had it delivered to Han Sui.

As expected, Ma Chao soon learned of the letter, and he grew even more suspicious. So he paid Han Sui a visit and asked to see the letter. Han Sui figured he had nothing to hide, so he handed it over.

"Why are there so many blotches and revisions on here?" Ma Chao asked.

"It was like that when I received it; I don't know why," Han Sui said.

"Cao Cao could not have sent you a rough draft," Ma Chao said. "Uncle, did you make these changes to hide something from me?"

"Maybe Cao Cao sent the draft by mistake?"

"I don't believe that. Cao Cao is far too meticulous for that. Uncle, I have joined forces with you to wage war on the traitor. Why are you double-crossing me?"

"If you don't believe my sincerity, then tomorrow on the battlefield, I will lure Cao Cao out on the pretext of wanting to talk, and you can storm out and kill him with one thrust of your spear," Han Sui said.

"THAT would prove your sincerity," Ma Chao agreed.

So the next day, Han Sui rode out with five of his lieutenants while Ma Chao hid within their lines. Han Sui sent someone over to Cao Cao's camp to shout, "General Han requests his excellency to come out for a word."

But instead of answering this call, Cao Cao sent out his general Cao Hong with a few dozen riders. Standing a few paces from Han Sui -- far enough that he had to raise his voice to be heard -- Cao Hong bowed from his saddle and said, loud enough for everyone hear:

"His excellency was most gratified by your words last night, general. Please make sure you don't slip up."

That was all Cao Hong said, and then he turned around and left. Of course, that was all the proof Ma Chao needed to confirm his every suspicion that conspiracy was afoot. Incensed, he dashed out and tried to stab Han Sui with his spear, but Han Sui's five lieutenants restrained him and convinced him to return to camp for now.

"My nephew, please don't doubt me. I am totally loyal to you!" Han Sui pleaded.

But Ma Chao refused to believe a word of it, and he went away seething with hatred.

Seeing this, Han Sui asked his lieutenants how he might resolve this. And remember, these are the guys that Cao Cao's adviser Jia Xu had been secretly talking to, so they were no doubt biased.

"Ma Chao is full of himself and often holds you in disdain," one of the lieutenants said. "Even if we defeat Cao Cao, he would not relent in his arrogance. Why not secretly submit to Lord Cao? You would be assured of receiving a title of nobility."

"But Ma Teng and I were sworn brothers. How can I bear to turn my back on his son?" Han Sui said.

"With things as they are, we have no choice," the lieutenant pressed.

Thus convinced, Han Sui sent that lieutenant over to Cao Cao's camp with a letter conveying his intention to submit. Cao Cao was delighted and immediately appointed Han Sui as the Marquis of Xiliang. The lieutenant who delivered the letter was promoted to the governor of Xiliang, and Han

Sui's other officers got positions, too. Then it was agreed that they would light a fire as a signal and join forces against Ma Chao.

Han Sui's lieutenant returned to camp and told his master of the plan. Han Sui was delighted and instructed his men to start piling up firewood behind his tent. Then, with his five lieutenants standing by with swords in tow, Han Sui discussed whether they should invite Ma Chao to a banquet and make their move then.

But before they could decide, Ma Chao had already caught wind that something was afoot, so he came to check it out with his personal guards while ordering his confidants Pang De and Ma Dai to follow with reinforcements.

Stepping lightly, Ma Chao slipped over to Han Sui's tent, where he saw the five lieutenants and Han Sui whispering to each other. He overheard one of them saying, "We must not delay. We need to act now!"

"You pack of scoundrels! How dare you conspire against me!" an incensed Ma Chao shouted as he stormed into the tent with sword in hand.

Everyone was stunned as Ma Chao swung his sword toward Han Sui's face. Instinctively, Han Sui raised his hand to shield his face, and in a rather Empire Strikes Back moment, his left hand was sliced clean off.

Han Sui's lieutenants now recovered their senses and pulled out their swords to defend their master. Ma Chao quickly stepped back outside the tent, and the five lieutenants followed in pursuit, encircling him in a scrum. But Ma Chao made quick work of these guys. Where his sword flashed, blood spilled and two of the lieutenants laid dead. The other three quickly fled.

Ma Chao now stepped back inside the tent to finish off Han Sui, but he had already been hustled away by his guards. At that moment, a fire broke out behind the tent, signaling for Han Sui's forces to

make their move. Ma Chao hustled back onto his horse. Pang De and Ma Dai also arrived just then, and the two sides were tangled in a chaotic fight.

By the time Ma Chao and his troops fought their way out of the camp, Cao Cao's reinforcements had arrived, led by Xu Chu in front, Xu Huang in the rear, Xiahou Yuan on the left, and Cao Hong on the right. Meanwhile, the Xiliang forces continued to fight each other. Ma Chao became separated from Pang De and Ma Dai, so he led about 100 riders and held his ground on the bridge across the Wei River.

As the sky began to lighten just a tad, Ma Chao noticed one of Han Sui's remaining lieutenants passing by with a squad of soldiers. Ma Chao galloped toward him, and this guy turned and ran. Just as Ma Chao was giving chase, one of Cao Cao's officers, Yu (1) Jin (4), arrived from behind. Yu Jin took a cheap shot at Ma Chao, firing an arrow from behind him. But Ma Chao heard the twang of the bow and quickly dodged the arrow. Instead, the arrow flew past Ma Chao and struck the guy that Ma Chao was chasing, killing him instantly.

Ma Chao now turned around and made for Yu Jin, and Yu Jin went, "Oh crap!" and fled. So Ma Chao returned to the bridge. By now, though, the bulk of Cao Cao's forces arrived, led by his elite Tiger Guards. They showered Ma Chao with arrows, but he managed to deflect them all with his spear.

Ma Chao rode to and fro in an attempt to break out, but he was encircled by a sea of enemy troops. Mustering his strength, Ma Chao let out a thunderous roar and powered his way north into the enemy ranks, but his followers were all cut off.

While Ma Chao was fighting his way through, an arrow suddenly struck his horse. The horse collapsed, throwing Ma Chao to the ground. Cao Cao's soldiers closed in, and things were looking dire. Just then, an army fought its way in from the northwest. It was Pang De and Ma Dai, coming to Ma

Chao's rescue. They gave Ma Chao another horse, and they carved out a blood-stained path and fled toward the northwest.

When Cao Cao heard that Ma Chao had broken out, he sent word to all his officers: "Even if you have to pursue day and night, do not let Ma Chao escape. Whoever brings me his head shall receive immense wealth. Whoever captures him alive will be made a commander."

Spurred on by these incentives, Cao Cao's men gave chase with all their might. Ma Chao, ignoring the exhaustion among his troops, kept on the run. The riders who followed him gradually drifted off, while the foot soldiers who could not keep up were mostly captured alive. By the end, Ma Chao found himself accompanied by only 30-some riders. With his forces decimated, he and Pang De and Ma Dai decided to flee toward the city of Lintao (2,2) in the region of Longxi (3,1).

Cao Cao, meanwhile, personally led the pursuit for a while. When he heard that Ma Chao had run far away, he finally decided to rein in his troops and lead them back to Chang'an to regroup and sort out the aftermath of this decisive victory.

First, Han Sui was now missing his left hand, so Cao Cao set him up in Chang'an to recover and made good on the promise of appointing him the Marquis of Xiliang. The two lieutenants who did not get killed were also given marquiships and ordered to guard the mouth of Wei (4) River.

Cao Cao then ordered his army to return to the capital Xuchang. Yang (2) Fu (4), the military adviser of Liang (2) Province, the province in which Ma Chao's old base of power Xiliang was located, now came to see Cao Cao and asked, "Ma Chao's valor rivals that of Lü Bu, and he is on good terms with the Jiang (1) tribes. If your excellency do not take this opportunity to eliminate him, when he rebuilds his powerbase, this region will not belong to the empire anymore. I hope your excellency will reconsider."

“I originally wanted to leave troops behind to take him on,” Cao Cao said. “But there’s too much going on in the Heartland, and the South is not yet pacified, so I cannot tarry for too long. You will have to defend this territory for me.”

Yang (2) Fu (4) accepted this charge, but he also recommended another man to serve as the imperial protector of the province to help him defend the city against Ma Chao. Before departing, Yang Fu (4) said to Cao Cao, “You must leave a strong force at Chang’an to provide backup.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already taken care of it,” Cao Cao said, and so Yang Fu (4) took his leave.

With that taken care of, Cao Cao’s officers now had a question for him:

“Back when the rebels occupied Tong (2) Pass, the way north was wide open. Why did your excellency contest the pass for so long before crossing to the north and attacking from the east bank of the river?”

“When they had the pass, if we had gone for the east bank right away, the rebels would have fortified the crossing points and kept us from getting over to the west bank. So, by concentrating my forces at the pass, I forced the rebels to put everything into defending themselves on the south side of the river, leaving the west bank to their north undefended. That allowed Xu Huang and Zhu Ling (2) to cross over. Then I led my troops across to the north bank, linking wagons to make a picket and building walls of ice and mud to make the enemy think we were weak, so that they would let their guard down. Then, I used trickery to sow discord among them while conserving our soldiers’ strength so that we could break them with a surprise attack. This is what is meant by ‘There’s no time to cover your ears after thunder peals.’ There’s more than one way to fight a war.”

Cao Cao’s men then asked him, “Whenever you heard that the enemy had received reinforcements, you appeared delighted. Why?”

“This is a remote region. If the enemy had stayed at their strong points, it would have taken a year or two to pacify them. But when they were all gathered together, even though they were numerous, they were not united, making it easy to turn them against each other and wipe them out in one fell swoop. That is why I was delighted.”

At this, all the officers bowed and said, “Your excellency’s divine strategies are unmatched!”

“I also had to rely on your efforts,” Cao Cao replied.

He then rewarded the troops handsomely and left Xiahou Yuan to garrison Chang’an and distribute the newly surrendered soldiers among several units. This done, Cao Cao led his army back to the capital, where the emperor personally welcomed him outside the walls of the city.

For his victory, the emperor granted Cao Cao some pretty hefty perks. In ancient China, when an official goes to meet the emperor at court, a courtier announces him by his rank and name. This was a subtle show of subjugation of the official to his liege. Well, Cao Cao was now exempt from having to be announced by name.

Also, when officials went to court, they were supposed to hurry forward in small steps while bowing. They were also required to remove their shoes and their swords before entering. Cao Cao was now exempt from those requirements as well. Such perks were only given to the greatest of great officials, and from that point on, Cao Cao’s prestige grew even greater.

So now that Cao Cao has pacified the northwest, where will he set his sights on next? Find out in the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.