

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 91.

Last time, Cao Cao and Liu Bei were gearing up for a clash over control of the region of Hanzhong. Liu Bei's general Huang Zhong was camped out in front of Mount Dingjun (4,1), a key location for Cao Cao's defenses in the region. The commander of Cao Cao's forces on Mount Dingjun was Xiahou Yuan, and he was being assisted by a couple officers who had already suffered defeats at the hands of Huang Zhong -- the general Zhang He and Xiahou Yuan's nephew, Xiahou Shang (4).

Once Cao Cao brought his army into the region, he gave Xiahou Yuan the go-ahead to engage Huang Zhong, so Xiahou Yuan drew up a scheme. The first part of the scheme involved his nephew Xiahou Shang going out to take on Huang Zhong and feigning defeat to lure the enemy in.

As for Huang Zhong, he and his adviser Fa Zheng were camped out at the entrance of the mountain. He had gone to challenge for battle numerous times, but Xiahou Yuan refused to come out. Huang Zhong thought about advancing his army up the mountain to press the issue, but the roads were treacherous, and he was also worried about enemy ambushes, so he stayed put.

Then, one day, word came that the enemy had come down from its mountain base to pick a fight. Huang Zhong was ready to go meet them, but one of his officers, a man named Chen (2) Shi (4), volunteered to go instead. So Huang Zhong gave Chen Shi (4) 1,000 men to go answer the challenge. When the two sides met, Xiahou Shang and Chen Shi traded blows for a few bouts, at which point Xiahou Shang turned and ran, just like the plan called for.

Chen Shi gave chase, but before long, he ran into a little surprise. Suddenly, logs and boulders rolled down the mountainside and blocked his path forward. Just as he was about to turn around, Xiahou Yuan appeared from behind him with an army and attacked. Chen Shi was no match for one of

Cao Cao's top generals, and Xiahou Yuan easily captured him alive. Most of the men under Chen Shi's command surrendered, though some did manage to escape and reported back to Huang Zhong.

When Huang Zhong heard what happened, he immediately huddled with his adviser Fa Zheng.

"Xiahou Yuan is a volatile man," Fa Zheng said. "He relies on his courage and rarely plans things out. We must inspire our troops and lead them forward, entrenching as we go. That will spur Xiahou Yuan to come fight us, giving us the chance to defeat him. This is called 'reversing the roles of host and guest.'"

Huang Zhong adopted this plan. He handed out handsome rewards to his troops, and the sounds of their happy cheers filled the canyon. With the troops properly motivated, Huang Zhong broke camp and moved them out that very day. At each stop along the way, they would build a new camp and stay a few days before pushing farther forward.

When Xiahou Yuan got wind of this, he wanted to go attack Huang Zhong, but the general Zhang He told him, "They're trying to reverse the roles of host and guest. We must not go fight them, or we would lose."

Xiahou Yuan refused to listen, though, and sent his nephew Xiahou Shang out with a few thousand men. Xiahou Shang marched to Huang Zhong's camp, where Huang Zhong came out to meet him. After just one bout, Huang Zhong captured Xiahou Shang alive and sent his men scurrying.

A messenger soon arrived in Huang Zhong's camp, bearing an offer from Xiahou Yuan: He would trade his prisoner, the officer Chen Shi (4), for Xiahou Shang. Huang said ok, and the two sides agreed to a prisoner exchange the next day.

On the next day, both sides lined up in their battle formations in a wide area in the canyon. The two commanders both sat atop their horses under their banners. The two prisoners were brought to

the front of the lines. Both men's armor had been removed, and they were wearing just a thin shirt. Then, a drum sounded, and the two prisoners were allowed to head toward their own lines. Chen Shi made it back to the Shu lines, but before his counterpart Xiahou Shang could make it back to his lines, a bowstring twanged, and an arrow struck him in the back.

The arrow had come from none other than Huang Zhong, and Xiahou Shang staggered back into his own lines with the arrow lodged in his back. His uncle Xiahou Yuan was outraged and galloped forth to attack Huang Zhong. That was exactly what Huang Zhong was hoping for, and they traded blows for 20-some bouts when suddenly, the sound of gongs rang out from Xiahou Yuan's camp, signaling the call for retreat. Xiahou Yuan immediately disengaged from the fight and fell back. Huang Zhong took advantage of this and gave chase for a bit, coming away with a nominal victory.

When Xiahou Yuan returned to his own lines, he asked the officer who ranged the gong why he had done so. The officer said he saw numerous enemy banners in the hills and was worried there would an ambush, so he called Xiahou Yuan back. So now, Xiahou Yuan decided to just defend his camp instead of going out to fight.

But of course, remember what Zhuge Liang had done earlier in the last episode. He had ordered a detachment of troops to plant banners in the hills for appearances, and sure enough, Xiahou Yuan fell for it. Now, Huang Zhong advanced all the way to the foot of Mount Dingjun (4, 1) and consulted the adviser Fa Zheng about how to proceed.

"To the west of Mount Dingjun is a tall mountain accessible only by treacherous roads," Fa Zheng said as he pointed. "From the top of that mountain, you can see the enemy's every move at Mount Dingjun. If you can take that mountain, then Mount Dingjun is as good as ours."

Huang Zhong looked up to where Fa Zheng was pointing, and he saw that the top of the second mountain was relatively flat, and it was manned by only a token force. So that night, around 9 o'clock, Huang Zhong led a detachment of troops and stormed up the mountainside.

This mountain was being defended by only a few hundred men, led by one of Xiahou Yuan's officers. When they saw Huang Zhong's much-larger force sweeping up the mountain, they promptly hightailed it out of there. So just like that, Huang Zhong controlled the peak across the way from Mount Dingjun, which gave him an eagle's eye view of Xiahou Yuan's every move. He and Fa Zheng now set about using that to their advantage.

"General, you should stay at the midway point of the mountain," Fa Zheng said. "I will stay at the top. When Xiahou Yuan arrives, I will raise a white flag as the signal for you to stand down. Once his troops are tired and complacent, I will raise a red flag, and then you can go down the mountain to attack. We rest while the enemy labors -- that will ensure victory."

Meanwhile, Xiahou Yuan saw the guy he had posted on that mountain scurrying back to him in defeat, and he was incensed.

"Now that Huang Zhong controls the mountain across the way, I have no choice but to attack," he said.

"But that plays right into Fa Zheng's scheme," the general Zhang He said. "General, you must not attack."

"Now that they control the mountain across the way, they can see our every move," Xiahou Yuan shot back. "How can I not attack?"

So Xiahou Yuan ignored repeated pleas from Zhang He and divided his forces to surround the opposite mountain to challenge for combat. But no matter how many insults he hurled up the mountain, Fa Zheng steadfastly kept the white flag raised, signaling for Huang Zhong to stay where he was.

Noon rolled around, and by now, Xiahou Yuan's troops were fatigued from trying to pick a fight all morning, and many of them had even dismounted and were just sitting around. When Fa Zheng saw this, he raised the red flag and told his men to sound the horns of battle.

As the earth trembled with the blaring of horns, Huang Zhong darted down the mountainside at the head of his troops as they surged toward Xiahou Yuan's men as if the heavens had fallen and the earth was caving in. Xiahou Yuan was caught off guard and could not prepare for battle in time. Instead, he tried to run, but Huang Zhong chased him down by his canopy. Huang Zhong let out a thunderous roar, and before Xiahou Yuan could even brace himself, Huang Zhong's sabre came down on him, slicing him in half diagonally, lopping off his shoulder and head in one stroke.

A poet later praised Huang Zhong's feat thus:

He faced the foe, though old and greyed,

But, oh, what wondrous might he displayed!

His arm to bend the bow availed;

He dashed ahead with snow-white blade.

His manly cry, a tiger's roar!

A winged dragon, his flying horse!

Xiahou Yuan's head won his ample fame

As he added more land to imperial claim.

Seeing their commander now missing a shoulder and a head, Xiahou Yuan's forces scattered as the men all ran for their own lives. Huang Zhong used this opportunity to attack Mount Dingjun. Zhang He came to meet him, but was attacked by Huang Zhong's forces from two sides, putting him

to flight. Just as Zhang He was running, another battalion of enemy troops suddenly flashed out from the hills. The general at its head shouted, "I am Zhao Yun of Changshan!"

Stunned and already beaten once today, Zhang He was in no mood to even attempt a fight, so he led his defeated army back toward Mount Dingjun, but he was soon greeted by a detachment of his own troops, who told him that Mount Dingjun had already been taken by the enemy officers Liu Feng and Meng Da. Zhang He now had no choice but to lead his men to their camp along the Han (4) River to regroup while he sent off an urgent message to Cao Cao to ask for a bailout.

When Cao Cao received word of his kinsman's death, he wept loudly. And only now did he understand one of the the prophecies he had received from the diviner Guan Lu. The prophecy, which was given in episode 88, went something like this:

Three and eight run crisscross;

A yellow pig meets a tiger.

South of the outpost,

You will lose a limb.

Let's break this down. The first line -- 3 and 8 crisscross -- means 3 times 8, which equals 24, corresponding with this being the 24th year of the current imperial era. The second line also is a date reference. The Chinese calendar had a 60-year cycle, and the last year of that cycle was deemed a year of the pig. As for the tiger part, that refers to the first month of the year. The months cycle through the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, and I guess in that particular year, the first month happened to be the month of tiger. The third line is the geographical location, in this case, south of

Mount Dingjun. And the last line refers to Cao Cao losing a kinsman, since he was a part of the Xiahou clan.

Upon realizing how prescient Guan Lu was, Cao Cao wanted to seek him out for further advice, but the seer was nowhere to be found. Cao Cao, now seething with hatred for Huang Zhong, personally led his army to Mount Dingjun to avenge Xiahou Yuan.

When he arrived, he was greeted by the general Zhang He, who told him, “Now that we’ve lost Mount Dingjun, we should move the grains stored at Mount Micang (3,1) to the camp on the northern hills before we advance further.” And Cao Cao did as he suggested.

Meanwhile, Huang Zhong returned to Jiameng (1,2) Pass with Xiahou Yuan’s head in tow to see Liu Bei. Liu Bei was delighted with this grisly present. He named Huang Zhong the General Who Conquers the West and threw a big party to celebrate. In the midst of this party, the officer Zhang (1) Zhe (0) brought word that Cao Cao was coming with 200,000 troops to avenge Xiahou Yuan and that Zhang He was moving provisions to the hills to the north of the Han (4) River.

“Cao Cao is afraid that he doesn’t have enough provisions for his large army,” Zhuge Liang. “That is why he hasn’t advanced yet. If we can send someone deep into enemy territory, set fire to their provisions and seize their heavy equipment, that will blunt Cao Cao’s momentum.”

And once again, Huang Zhong eagerly stepped up, but Zhuge Liang said, “Cao Cao is not like Xiahou Yuan. We must not underestimate the enemy.”

Liu Bei had seen this act enough times to know how to play along. He chimed in and said, “Even though Xiahou Yuan was the commander, he was but a brute. How can he compare to Zhang He? If we can kill Zhang He, it would be worth 10 Xiahou Yuans.”

Of course, before Huang Zhong set out on the last mission, Zhuge Liang had said the exact opposite about Xiahou Yuan, talking about how superior he was to Zhang He. But let's just pretend that didn't happen. Huang Zhong still eagerly volunteered to go collect Zhang He's head as well.

"You and Zhao Yun will go together," Zhuge Liang said. "Plan every move, and we'll see which one of you gets the merit."

Huang Zhong agreed, so he and Zhao Yun set out, and the officer Zhang Zhe also tagged along as the lieutenant. After accepting the assignment, Zhao Yun said to Huang Zhong, "Right now Cao Cao leads an army of 200,000, divided across 10 camps. General, you told our lord that you are going to raid the enemy's provisions; that is no laughing matter. What is your plan?"

"How about if I go first?" Huang Zhong said.

"No, let me go first," Zhao Yun insisted.

"But I am the commanding general, and you're my second," Huang Zhong retorted. "Why do you challenge my lead?"

"We both labor equally in our lord's service, so let's not squabble over who's first and who's second," Zhao Yun said. "Let's draw lots. Whoever wins goes first."

So they drew lots, and Huang Zhong won, so Zhao Yun told him, "Since you're going first, I will help. If you return by the agreed-upon hour, then I will do nothing. But if you do not return by then, I will lead my troops to back you up."

Huang Zhong agreed, and the two settled on noon as the time for Huang Zhong's return. Once he returned to his own camp, Zhao Yun summoned his officer Zhang Yi (4) and said, "Huang Zhong is going to raid the enemy's provisions tomorrow. If he does not return by noon, I will go help. Our camp is on the Han River and is vulnerable. If I go, then you must be vigilant in defending the camp and cannot make rash moves."



Meanwhile, in Huang Zhong's camp, the old general said to his lieutenant Zhang Zhe, "Zhang He is scared out of his mind, having seen me cut down Xiahou Yuan. Tomorrow, I am going to raid his provisions. I'll leave just 500 men here to defend the camp. You will go assist me. Tonight, have our men eat a meal at 11 o'clock. We'll leave camp at 1 a.m. and attack the northern hills. First we capture Zhang He, then we take the provisions."

And so it was settled. That night, Huang Zhong led the front of his column, while Zhang Zhe brought up the rear as they sneaked across the Han River and advanced to the foot of the northern hills. By now, the sun was starting to climb up the sky in the east. In the morning light, they could see that the enemy's provisions were piled up like mountains, and what's more, they were only defended by a small number of soldiers.

As soon as the soldiers defending the grain saw Huang Zhong's troops approaching, they abandoned post and ran. Huang Zhong told his cavalry to dismount and start setting fire to the grain. But before they could light the match, Zhang He arrived on the scene, and the two sides scrummed. Word soon reached Cao Cao, and he immediately dispatched his vanguard general Xu Huang to help. This relief force managed to encircle Huang Zhong and trap him in the middle. On Zhang Zhe and the 300 or so troops in the rear of Huang Zhong's column was able to get away, but just they were about to head back to camp, another squad of Cao Cao's troops appeared, led by the general Wen (2) Pin (4), and more reinforcements soon arrived, trapping Zhang Zhe as well.

While Huang Zhong and company were getting themselves into trouble, Zhao Yun was waiting anxiously at his camp. By the time noon rolled around, there was still no sign of his comrade returning from his mission, so Zhao Yun quickly set out with 3,000 soldiers. Before he left, he instructed his

officer Zhang Yi, "Fortify our defenses. Station extra archers and crossbowmen on both flanks, just in case."

Zhao Yun then galloped off with spear in hand, and soon he ran smack dab into one of Wen Pin's lieutenants, coming to stop him. But Zhao Yun needed just one thrust of his spear to dispatch this nameless schmoe and send his men scampering off.

Zhao Yun then dashed into the thick of the enemy ranks, whereupon he ran into another enemy officer whom I will not bother to name.

"Where are my comrades?!" Zhao Yun shouted.

"We've killed them all!" this guy boasted.

Well, that was the wrong to say, because it riled up Zhao Yun, and one thrust of his spear later, the enemy officer was regretting what he had said as he laid dying with a hole in his chest. Zhao Yun charged forth until he reached the foot of the northern hills. There, he saw Huang Zhong and his men being surrounded by troops led by Zhang He and Xu Huang.

With one loud roar, Zhao Yun crashed into the enemy troops, storming to and fro as if no one was there. His spear flashed all over the place like scattering pear blossoms and dancing snowflakes. Zhang He and Xu Huang were both intimidated and dared not challenge him, so Zhao Yun was able to rescue Huang Zhong, and the two of them fought their way out, meeting no resistance as no one dared to get in their way.

While this was happening, Cao Cao was watching the action unfold from atop a nearby hill. Stunned at the turn of events, he asked his officers who it was that just rescued Huang Zhong. Someone told him, "That's Zhao Yun."

"[Gasp] The hero of Changban (2,3) Ridge still lives!" Cao Cao said with astonishment. He then quickly sent out the order to his men that they were not to underestimate the enemy, which seems like something that doesn't really need to be said, but whatever. It didn't matter how seriously Cao

Cao's men took the enemy, because they could not stop Zhao Yun as he helped Huang Zhong fight his way out of the enemy lines.

But no sooner had they done that did someone point to the southeast and said, "That must be lieutenant Zhang Zhe being trapped over there!"

Sigh. So instead of heading back to base, Zhao Yun turned and charged toward the southeast. His banner, which read "Zhao Yun of Changshan", followed him. Wherever he went, as soon as the enemy saw the banner in the distance, those among them who were at Changban Ridge told the guys around them about how much butt Zhao Yun kicked on that day, and they all decided they did not want any piece of that. So they promptly turned and fled before Zhao Yun could get there, thus allowing Zhao Yun to rescue Zhang Zhe as well.

Well, Cao Cao was not amused by this. He now personally led his detachment of troops and gave chase. Zhao Yun managed to beat them back to his own camp, where his officer Zhang Yi greeted him. Seeing the immense dust cloud in the distance, a sign that a large army was coming this way, Zhang Yi said to Zhao Yun, "The enemy is getting close. We must tell our men to close the camp gates and ascend the battle towers to mount a defense!"

"DO NOT close the gates!" Zhao Yun shouted. "Don't you know that back at Changban Ridge, I, with just my spear and my horse, stared down Cao Cao's 830,000 troops as if they were nothing more than young blades of grass?! Right now, I have an army and officers, so what reason do I have to be afraid?"

So Zhao Yun ordered his archers and crossbowmen to lie in wait in the trenches outside the camp. Inside the camp, he ordered that all weapons and banners be lowered and all the drums and gongs silenced. This done, Zhao Yun sat on his horse, held his spear, and waited outside the gates of his camp, alone.

Moments later, Cao Cao's generals Zhang He and Xu Huang arrived with the front of the pursuing army. By now, it was starting to get dark. When they saw no movement at all from inside Zhao Yun's camp, and that Zhao Yun was standing outside the camp alone, the two pursuing generals did not dare to advance. Just as they were standing around, Cao Cao arrived and ordered everyone forward. Well, he's the boss, so everybody let out a loud yell and charged toward the camp.

Zhao Yun, however, remained motionless in the face of this oncoming tidal wave, and that, along with his reputation, was enough to freak out Cao Cao's men as they all held up short of the camp and turned around and ran back the other way.

At that moment, Zhao Yun waved his spear, and his archers and crossbowmen stood up from their trenches and fired. By now, it was pretty dark, so Cao Cao's men had no idea how big a force they were going up against. Cao Cao himself was the first one to turn around and run. From behind, he could hear loud cries of battle, along with the blaring of horns as the Shu army gave chase. Cao Cao's men trampled each other as they fled toward the Han River. And when they arrived at the river bank, countless men were pushed by the tidal wave of fellow fleeing soldiers into the water and drowned.

While Cao Cao's army ran, Zhao Yun, Huang Zhong, and Zhang Zhe each led a battalion in hot pursuit. Just as Cao Cao was running, he got more bad news. The Shu officers Liu Feng (1) and Meng (4) Da (2) were leading two armies and attacking from the direction of Mount Micang (3,1), and they had set Cao Cao's provisions on fire. Cao Cao now abandoned the provisions on the northern hills and fled all the way back to his home base in Nanzheng (2,4). His officers Xu Huang and Zhang He could not withstand the onslaught, so they both abandoned camp as well. Zhao Yun occupied the enemy camp, while Huang Zhong seized their provisions, and countless weapons were recovered by the Han River.

Once things had settled down, Zhao Yun and Huang Zhong sent word of this complete victory to Liu Bei, and soon, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang arrived at the Han River camp. They asked Zhao Yun's soldiers what had transpired during the battle, and they recounted Zhao Yun's daring heroics in rescuing his comrades and standing his ground outside his camp.

Liu Bei was delighted by this tale, and upon seeing how vulnerable the camp's situation was, he said to Zhuge Liang, "Zhao Yun has valor through and through!" A poet later praised Zhao Yun thus:

Then at Changban Ridge, and no less now:

A mighty man of power,

Tearing the enemy lines,

Breaking through their traps.

Ghosts moaned below, spirits howled above;

Heaven quaked, and earth grieved.

Zhao Yun of Changshan --

"Valor through and through."

To recognize this valor, Liu Bei named Zhao Yun the General of Tiger Might, and a celebratory feast followed late into the night. But suddenly, word came that Cao Cao was back again, this time, leading his army down the backroad through Xie (2) Gorge to take back the position along the Han River.

"Cao Cao is coming for nothing," Liu Bei laughed. "I think the Han River is ours for sure." And he led his troops to the west side of the river to await Cao Cao.

On the other side, Cao Cao ordered the general Xu Huang to lead the vanguard to meet the enemy. When that order came down, an officer named Wang (2) Ping (2) stepped forth and said, “I know this area well. I would like to help General Xu defeat the enemy.”

Cao Cao consented and named Wang Ping second in command of the vanguard. Cao Cao himself now took up position on the north side of Mount Dingjun, while Xu Huang and Wang Ping led the vanguard to the Han River. To see how the coming battle will shake out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.