

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 94.

Last time, Liu Bei had just made himself the King of Hanzhong. Cao Cao responded by initiating a scheme to form an alliance with Sun Quan in the Southlands and make a move to take Jing Province. When Liu Bei caught wind of this, he told his brother Guan Yu, who was overseeing the defense of Jing Province, to launch a preemptive strike on the city of Xiangyang (1,2).

Oh and by the way, from here on out, there will be times when I refer to the opposing sides by the name of the kingdoms that they eventually become, even though those kingdoms do not officially exist yet at this particular point in the novel. So that'd be the kingdom of Shu (2) for Liu Bei. I might also call it Xishu (1,2), meaning West Shu. We also have the kingdom of Wei (4), or Beiwei (3,4), aka, North Wei, for Cao Cao. And then there's the kingdom of Wu (2), or Dongwu, meaning East Wu, for Sun Quan.

Ok, back to the battle at hand. Xiangyang was being defended by Cao Cao's kinsman Cao Ren, and Cao Ren decided to go meet Guan Yu head on. When Guan Yu heard that the enemy was approaching, he drew up a scheme and sent his son Guan Ping and the officer Liao Hua to go meet Cao Ren.

When the two sides ran into each other, Liao Hua rode out to challenge for battle, and one of Cao Ren's officers went out to take him on. After a few bouts, Liao Hua turned and fled, and Cao Ren's army gave chase for a few miles before stopping for the day.

The next day, Liao Hua and Guan Ping came to challenge for battle again, and this time, two of Cao Ren's officers went out to greet them, and the enemy soon turned and fled again, and Cao Ren's officers gave chase again.

This time, though, they followed Guan Ping and Liao Hua right into a trap. After chasing for a few miles, they suddenly heard loud roars, drums, and horns behind them. Cao Ren hurriedly ordered his troops to fall back, but by now, Guan Ping and Liao Hua had turned their army around and were

charging back this way. Cao Ren's men fell into disarray, and Cao Ren said, the heck with this, and made a beeline back toward his home base of Xiangyang.

When he was a couple miles away from the city, however, Cao Ren found his path cut off by a cluster of banners and men, led by none other than Guan Yu himself. Cao Ren was too intimidated to trade blows with Guan Yu, so he changed directions and made a run toward the city of Fancheng, the other location he held in this region. Guan Yu didn't bother giving chase.

Momentarily, the two officers that Cao Ren had sent out to fight earlier arrived on the scene, and they weren't as smart as their boss. They actually tried to fight, but you can guess the results. Within a bout, Guan Yu and Guan Ping had each cut down one of those two officers. With their leaders dead, the Wei troops were crushed, with most of them being swept into the river, where they drowned. So just like that, Xiangyang belonged to Guan Yu.

Once things settled down from the battle, Guan Yu's officer Wang (2) Fu (3) came to see him and said, "General, you have taken Xiangyang in one fell swoop and struck fear into the enemy, but in my humble opinion, the Dongwu general Lü (3) Meng (2) has garrisoned soldiers at the location of Lu (4) Kou (3) and harbors thoughts of gobbling up Jing Province. What would we do if he invades?"

"I have thought about that as well," Guan Yu said. "You can go take care of that. Along the river, build a watchtower every 7 to 10 miles and station 50 soldiers at each tower. If the Dongwu forces cross the river, send a signal, either by fire at night or by smoke during the day, and I will personally go attack them."

"The officers Mi (2) Fang (1) and Fu (4) Shiren (4,2) are defending two important locations," Wang (2) Fu (3) added, referring to the two disgraced officers that Guan Yu had reassigned earlier. "I worry they might not put forth all their effort. You must appoint another person to oversee Jing Province."

“I have already sent lieutenant inspector Pan (1) Jun (4) to defend Jing Province; there’s no need for worry,” Guan Yu said.

“Pan Jun (4) is a suspicious sort and always looking out for himself,” Wang Fu said. “You must not entrust him with this. You should send Zhao (4) Lei (4), the field director of the commissary, to take his place. Zhao (4) Lei (4) is loyal, sincere, and straightforward. If you use him, there will be no slipups.”

“But I know Pan Jun’s personality well,” Guan Yu said. “I have already given out the assignment. There’s no need to change it. Besides, Zhao Lei is overseeing the provisions, which is also an important task. Don’t be too suspicious. Just go take care of the watchtowers for me.”

Rebuffed, a dismayed Wang Fu took his leave, while Guan Yu ordered ships be prepared to cross the river and attack Fancheng (2,2).

Inside Fancheng, Cao Ren, having lost two officers and a battle, said to the consultant Man (2) Chong (3), “I did not listen to your advice and ended up losing troops and officers, not to mention Xiangyang. Now what should we do?”

“Guan Yu is a fierce warrior, and smart to boot,” Man Chong replied. “We must not underestimate him. The best thing to do is to fortify our defenses.”

As they were speaking, word came that Guan Yu was crossing the river and heading their way. Cao Ren was greatly alarmed, and Man Chong again advised him to just stay in and defend the city. However, yet another officer under Cao Ren’s command refused to pay heed to these words of wisdom and insisted on going out to fight.

“If we listen to you civil officials and just defend, how can we repel the enemy?” this guy said. “Have you not heard of the military strategy that the best time to strike an enemy is while they’re

crossing a river? Right now Guan Yu's army is crossing the river, so why not attack? If we wait until they're at our doorstep, it would be hard to hold them off."

Cao Ren was swayed by this argument, so he sent the guy out with 2,000 men. When they arrived at the mouth of the river, they saw Guan Yu sitting atop his horse with saber in hand under his banners. As soon as Cao Ren's troops saw Guan Yu's impressive visage, they decided they did not want any piece of that and all started to flee without a single blow being exchanged. Their commanding officer tried to stop them, but to no avail. Guan Yu took this opportunity to charge and rout the enemy, killing the majority and sending the rest scurrying back inside Fancheng.

Defeated yet again, Cao Ren now sent an urgent dispatch to the city of Changan (2,1) to ask Cao Cao for help. Cao Cao pointed to the veteran general Yu (1) Jin (4) and said, "You will go break the siege on Fancheng (2,2)."

Yu Jin, who had been with Cao Cao for a long time and rendered great service over the years, answered the call right away, but he said, "I'd like to request that you send another general to be the vanguard."

"Who dares to serve as the vanguard?" Cao Cao asked the other officers.

One man boldly stepped forward and said, "I am willing to do all I can to capture Guan Yu alive and present him to you!"

This was the general Pang De, who joined Cao Cao's ranks when Cao Cao conquered the region of Hanzhong. Cao Cao was delighted by this.

"Guan Yu's name has terrified the North, and he has yet to meet his match," Cao Cao said. "But you will be a worthy opponent."

So Cao Cao put Yu Jin in charge of a large army and appointed Pang De to lead the vanguard. But one of Yu Jin's officers said to him, "General, you're leading a big army to save Fancheng. This is a battle we must win, yet you're using Pang De to lead your vanguard. That'd lead to ruin."

When Yu Jin asked why, the officer explained, "Pang De used to be an officer under Ma Chao, and he only surrendered to us because he had no choice. Right now, his former master is one of the Five Tiger Generals in Shu (2). Furthermore, his older brother is also an official in the Riverlands. Making him the vanguard is like pouring oil on a fire. You should ask his highness to appoint someone else."

Upon hearing this, Yu Jin went to see Cao Cao at his residence that night and relayed those concerns. Cao Cao immediately summoned Pang De and told him that he had been relieved of his position as the vanguard, which left Pang De stunned.

"I was just about to render service to your highness; why do you refuse me?" he asked.

"I did not have any cause for concern at first, but right now your old master Ma Chao and your brother are both serving Liu Bei in the Riverlands. Even if I have no cause for suspicion, what would others say?"

When Pang De heard this, he removed his cap and banged his head against the floor as he kowtowed until his forehead started to bleed. Then, with blood and tears streaming down his face, he said, "Ever since I surrendered to your highness, I have been deeply touched by your kindness. Even if my brains and innards were scattered across the ground, it would not be enough to repay you. Why does your highness doubt my loyalty? Back when I was in my hometown, I lived with my brother. His wife was unvirtuous, so I killed her in a drunken rage. My brother despises me and has sworn to never see me, so our bond is broken. As for my old master Ma Chao, he was all brawn and no brain, losing both his troops and his territory and fleeing to the Riverlands by himself. He and I now serve different masters, and our former connection is severed. I am deeply touched by your highness's kind treatment, so how can I harbor any stray intentions? Please reconsider!"

This speech moved Cao Cao, and he rose to help Pang De to his feet.

“I am well aware of your loyalty and honor,” Cao Cao said. “What I said before was just to appease others. Go, and hold nothing back. If you do not disappoint me, I shall not disappoint you either.”

Having saved his position, Pang De thanked Cao Cao. When he got home, he had a wooden coffin made. The next day, he invited a bunch of friends over for a feast, and in the middle of the banquet hall sat his brand new, hastily constructed coffin, a sight that alarmed his friends.

“General, you’re about to go on campaign. Why do you have this unlucky object around?” they asked him.

Raising his cup and toasting his friends, Pang De replied, “Having received great kindness from the King of Wei, I have sworn to repay him with my life. I am going to Fancheng to fight Guan Yu. If I cannot kill him, then I will no doubt be killed by him. Even if he doesn’t kill me, I would kill myself. That is why I have prepared this coffin, which shall not return empty.”

Those words left his dinner guests aghast. But Pang De wasn’t quite done being melodramatic yet. He now summoned his wife and son to the banquet and said to his wife, “As the vanguard, it is only right that I should die on the battlefield. If I die, raise my son well. He has an uncommon appearance. When he grows up, he shall avenge me.”

Then, as his wife and son wailed, Pang De told his men to take the coffin and head out with him. As he was about to depart, he told the 500 men in his personal entourage, “I am going to fight Guan Yu to the death. If he kills me, then put my corpse in this coffin. If I kill him, then I will place his head in this coffin and present it to the King of Wei.”

This little pep talk moved his men, who responded, “General, you’re so loyal and courageous. How can we not give you everything we have?!”

With his troops sufficiently motivated and his family and friends more than sufficiently depressed, Pang De set off with the vanguard. When Cao Cao heard about his little pre-departure display, he said with delight, "Pang De is so loyal and courageous, what need have I for concern?"

His adviser Jia (2) Xu (3), however, begged to differ. "Pang De is counting on his raw physical courage and intent on fighting Guan Yu to the death. That gives me doubts," he said.

Hearing that, Cao Cao quickly sent a reminder to Pang De, saying, "Guan Yu is smart and brave; you must not underestimate him. If it is feasible to attack, then attack, but if not, you should be cautious and defend."

But while Pang De received the message, he didn't REALLY get the message.

"Why does his highness think so highly of Guan Yu?" he asked the other officers. "I expect that I shall shatter the reputation he has built over the last 30 years."

"We must pay heed to his highness's words," Yu Jin countered.

Pang De was like, yeah we'll see. And he led his troops forward with a full head of steam.

Meanwhile, Guan Yu was camped outside of Fancheng when scouts reported that Cao Cao had sent Yu Jin at the head of a large army. What's more, Pang De, the vanguard, was marching this way with a coffin in tow and saying all sorts of disrespectful stuff about how he was going to fight you to the death. They're only about 10 miles away.

When Guan Yu heard this news, his face changed colors and even his beard quivered with anger.

"All the heroes of the realm cower at the sound of my name! How dare that punk Pang De disrespect me?! Guan Ping, you go lay siege to Fancheng. I will go dispatch that punk to soothe my wrath!"

"Father, does the mighty Mount Tai (4) bother to quibble with a common stone?" Guan Ping said, trying to hold his father back. "Allow your pitiful son to go fight Pang De on your behalf."

“Fine, you go test him out; I will be right behind you,” Guan Yu said.

So Guan Ping headed out to meet Pang De. When the two sides lined up, Pang De rode out on a white horse, wielding a steel saber, and cloaked in a green robe and silver armor. He stood in front of his lines, backed by his 500-men personal guard, plus a handful of foot soldiers who carried the wooden coffin out to the front lines.

Guan Ping cursed Pang De, calling him a traitor to his master. Pang De asked his men who that was, and they told him it was Guan Yu’s adopted son.

“By the order of the King of Wei, I have come to take your father’s head,” Pang De shouted to Guan Ping. “You’re a baby, so I won’t kill you! Go and tell your father to come!”

Well, baby Guan Ping did not appreciate those words, so he rode straight for Pang De, and the two traded blows for about 30 bouts without a winner before they broke up for a rest. When Guan Yu heard this, he got even angrier. So he put the officer Liao Hua in charge of the siege on Fancheng and personally went to take on Pang De.

After running into Guan Ping and hearing about the fight against Pang De, Guan Yu rode out to the front of the lines and shouted, “Guan Yu is here. Pang De, come meet your maker!”

As the drum sounded, Pang De rode out and said, “By the order of the King of Wei, I have come to take your head! I was worried that you won’t believe me, so I have prepared your coffin right here. If you don’t want to die, then surrender now!”

Well, you can imagine how Guan Yu reacted to that.

“You’re nothing but a skunk! What skills do you have?! It’s a pity that my Green Dragon Saber has to be stained with the blood of a rat!”



And with that, they threw themselves at each other. Their sabers clanged for 100-some bouts, and the two men seemed to grow stronger as the fight went on. Men on both sides were dazed just watching them hacking at each other.

After a while, the Wei troops were worried that Pang De might slip up, so they rang the gong for retreat. On the other side, Guan Ping, concerned that his father's stamina might be sagging with age, also rang the gong for retreat. So the two sides broke off and each went back to camp.

Once Pang De returned to his camp, he told his fellow officers, "Only now do I believe everyone's praise for Guan Yu's valor."

Just then, his commander Yu Jin dropped by.

"General," Yu Jin said, "I heard you fought Guan Yu for 100-some bouts today without gaining any advantage. How about if we fall back for now?"

Pang De was having none of that.

"General, the King of Wei appointed you as the commander," Pang De said. "Why are you so timid? Tomorrow I shall fight Guan Yu to the death. I swear that I shall never fall back!"

Seeing that Pang De's blood was up, Yu Jin did not dare to press the issue, so he just went back to his own camp.

Meanwhile, in the other camp, Guan Yu said to his son Guan Ping, "Pang De is skilled with the saber. He's truly a match for me."

"Father," Guan Ping replied, "As the old saying goes, a newborn calf has no fear of a tiger. Even if you killed Pang De, he's nothing more than a pawn from the barbarian tribes. On the other hand, if something were to go wrong, we would have failed the important task that uncle has entrusted to you."

“If I do not kill Pang De, how can my anger be soothed?!” Guan Yu shot back. “My mind is made up; say no more!”

So in case you haven't noticed, Guan Yu has been doing a lot of this “my mind is made up; say no more” thing lately. The guy has always been stubborn, but I guess that's getting worse with age now. In any case, there was no dissuading either Guan Yu or Pang De from a rematch, so the next day, they lined up and went at each other once again.

This time, after 50-some bouts, Pang De turned and ran, dragging his saber behind him. Guan Yu gave chase, and Guan Ping, fearing for his father's safety, followed closely behind. As he gave chase, Guan Yu cursed Pang De, “You scoundrel! You're trying to use the dragging saber trick. Do you think I'm scared of you?!”

Guan Yu was right that Pang De had deception in mind, but he was wrong in which form of deception Pang De was planning. The dragging saber trick was where the guy pretending to escape suddenly stops and whirls around to take a swing with his saber to catch his pursuer unawares. But this was not what Pang De had in mind. Instead, he latched his saber on his saddle and discretely retrieved his bow and arrow. Then, in the blink of an eye, he turned and fired.

Guan Ping had sharp eyes and spotted this quickly and shouted a warning to his father as the bowstring twanged. Guan Yu saw the arrow coming, but could not dodge it in time. Instead, it lodged itself in Guan Yu's left arm.

Guan Ping quickly escorted his wounded father back to camp. Pang De was just about to give chase when suddenly, the loud clanging of gongs rang out from his own camp, signaling retreat. Pang De was worried that something was afoot behind his army, so he quickly turned around and rode back to his lines.

But there was no emergency, just jealousy at play. Pang De's commander, Yu Jin, wasn't too fond of the idea of Pang De possibly stealing his thunder by defeating Guan Yu, so he signaled retreat. When Pang De asked why he had rang the gongs, Yu Jin said, "The King of Wei cautioned us that Guan Yu is both valiant and smart. Even though he was wounded, I was worried he might be trying to trick you, so I signaled retreat."

"If you hadn't done so, I would have killed him by now," Pang De lamented.

"Well, we have no good strategy right now, so let's just take it slow," Yu Jin said.

So Pang De, brave was he was, was not the smartest guy around, so he took everything Yu Jin said at face value, and instead of being suspicious, he just lamented the missed opportunity.

Meanwhile, Guan Yu returned to camp and the army surgeon extracted the arrow head from his left arm. Fortunately, the arrow did not go in too deep, so Guan Yu was ok once his wound was bandaged. But the treatment did nothing for his ire, which was now fully directed at Pang De.

"I swear I will avenge this arrow!" he told his officers.

Everyone tried to tell him to cool it and rest for a few days before fighting again. When Pang De came to challenge for battle the next day, Guan Yu wanted to go out right then and there, but his officers managed to keep him at bay. For the next dozen or so days, Pang De came and hurled insults outside the camp, but Guan Ping merely fortified the defenses and told the other officers to not say a word of this to Guan Yu.

Seeing no response to his challenge for a couple weeks, Pang De went to Yu Jin and said, "It looks like Guan Yu's arrow wound must have gotten worse and immobilized him. Why don't we take this opportunity to storm into their camp. That will lift the siege on Fancheng."

Yu Jin, however, was still wary of letting Pang De get all the credit, so he rejected the suggestion, citing once again Cao Cao's caution. Pang De tried time and again to change his mind, but Yu Jin

steadfastly refused. In fact, just to make a point that there was not going to be any attack, Yu Jin actually moved his troops, relocating the whole army on the other side of the mouth of a ravine, setting up camp by the hills a few miles north of Fancheng. Yu Jin personally led the bulk of the troops that camped on the main thoroughfare while stationing Pang De behind him inside the ravine, making it impossible for Pang De to advance his own troops.

While Yu Jin was sabotaging his own officer, Guan Yu's wound was healing nicely. News of Yu Jin's redeployment of his troops soon reached Guan Yu, and Guan Yu led a few riders to a high vantage point to scout out the enemy. When they looked inside Fancheng, the city they had been besieging, they saw disorganized banners and panicked soldiers. When they looked a few miles north of the city, they saw Yu Jin's troops camped out inside a ravine. When they looked to the nearby Xiang (1) River, they saw that the currents were very strong.

After sizing up the situation for a while, Guan Yu asked his guide, "What is the name of the ravine to the north of Fancheng?"

"It's called Open Net Stream," the guide answered.

When he heard this, Guan Yu was delighted.

"I will capture Yu Jin for sure!" he said.

When his men asked why he was so confident, Guan Yu explained, "When a fish enters a net, how can it last long?"

So a quick explanation is in order here. Guan Yu is engaging in a favorite Chinese pastime -- making a play off words that sound similar. Yu Jin's last name, Yu, sounds similar to the word for fish. So Guan Yu is saying that this is a good omen for him. But of course, for this play on words to work, you have to pronounce Yu Jin's last name in a different tone, and it's a different character anyway, so

the whole thing is a bit of a stretch. Guan Yu's men certainly thought so, as they were a little skeptical about their general's confidence.

When Guan Yu returned to camp, he began making plans to tighten the net. It was autumn, and it had been raining for days. Guan Yu now told his men to prepare boats and other equipment for naval battle.

"But we're facing the enemy on land; why do we need boats?" Guan Ping asked.

"You guys don't understand," Guan Yu said. "Instead of camping on open ground, Yu Jin has stationed his army inside a treacherous spot inside Open Net Stream. With all the rain lately, the Jiang River must be rising. I have already dispatched men to key spots along the river. When the river rises, we will get on our boats, breach the bank of river and redirect its water. The enemy troops inside the ravine will be nothing more than fish food."

This idea impressed Guan Ping. To see how well Guan Yu will make out on his fishing trip, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!