



*Huang Zhong's Fresh Fighters Conquer a Fatigued Foe;
Zhao Zilong's Few Overcome Many*

"SINCE YOU ARE DETERMINED TO DO BATTLE with Xiahou Yuan," Kongming told Huang Zhong, "I will have Fa Zheng back you up. Work out every angle of the campaign with him before you start. I will follow with reinforcements." To these conditions Huang Zhong agreed; then he set out with Fa Zheng.

"One really has to stir up the old general before he will accomplish anything," Kongming explained to Xuande. "But this time support troops will be needed." He instructed Zhao Zilong: "Take a brigade along the side roads and reinforce him. But stay put unless Huang Zhong is being defeated." Next, Kongming gave orders to Liu Feng and Meng Da: "Take three thousand troops and cover the key points in the mountains. Plant plenty of flags and banners to impress and intimidate the enemy." The three—Zhao Zilong, Liu Feng, and Meng Da—departed to carry out their orders. Kongming also sent a man to Ma Chao with certain instructions. Finally, he sent Yan Yan to defend key points in Baxi and Langzhong and to relieve Zhang Fei and Wei Yan so they could join in the conquest of Hanzhong.¹

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Zhang He and Xiahou Shang went to Xiahou Yuan and confessed, "Mount Tiandang is lost, Xiahou De and Han Hao have been killed. Liu Bei himself is said to be leading an army to Hanzhong. We must petition the king of Wei at once for fresh forces to meet this threat." Xiahou Yuan notified Cao Hong, who raced to the capital and presented the news to Cao Cao. Cao hurriedly gathered his counselors to discuss sending troops to save Hanzhong. Liu Ye, one of his chief advisers, said, "If Hanzhong is lost, the northern heartland will be shaken. Your Highness must accept the heavy responsibility of leading the campaign yourself." Cao Cao responded ruefully, "This is what I get for not heeding your advice to complete the conquest of the Riverlands," and ordered four hundred thousand men put under his personal command.

It was the seventh month, autumn, of Jian An 23 (A.D. 218). Cao Cao divided his force into three field armies: the vanguard of the forward army was under Xiahou Dun; Cao Cao himself had the center army; and Cao Xiu had the rear. All three units departed in order. Cao Cao rode a white horse. He had a gilt saddle, a jade-starred belt, and damask clothes. His elite guard held a large gold-threaded red silk canopy over him, and the regal golden mace and silver broadaxe to his left and right. The guard raised their clubs and

spears, and they flew banners bearing images of the sun, the moon, the dragon, and the phoenix. Protecting Cao Cao's person was an imperial guard of twenty-five thousand men divided into five units designated by color: blue-green, yellow, red, white, and black.² Their pennants and their horses' armor bore the color of their respective units. It was a glorious panoply, majestic and overwhelming.

As his troops moved through Tong Pass, Cao Cao sighted a flourishing wood in the distance. "What place is that?" he asked an attendant. "Indigo Field," was the reply. "Cai Yong's manor is somewhere in there. His daughter Yan and her husband, Dong Si, occupy it now." Cao Cao had always been on good terms with Cai Yong. In earlier days his daughter Yan had been the wife of Wei Zhongdao. Later, she was taken captive by the northern tribes and bore two sons while among them. Her poems, "Eighteen Tunes for Foreign Flute," circulated in northern China. Cao Cao himself sympathized with her and had someone ransom her for one thousand ounces of gold. The Xiongnu chief, worthy king of the Left, fearful of Cao's power, sent Cai Yan back to the land of Han, and Cao Cao gave her in marriage to Dong Si.

Standing before the manor, Cao Cao was reminded of the Cai Yong incident. He ordered his army to go on ahead while he dismounted, accompanied by a hundred guards. Dong Si had left to take up an official post; Cai Yan was at home. She rushed to welcome the visitor. When Cao reached the upper hall, Cai Yan stood to one side after completing the customary ritual reception. Cao Cao happened to notice a stone rubbing and went over to examine the text. He questioned Cai Yan about it. "It's taken from the tablet of Cao E," she explained to him. "During the time of Emperor He [r. A.D. 89–106] in Shangyu there was a shaman named Cao Xu whose whirling dances could have entertained the gods. On the fifth day of the fifth month, while performing on a boat, he fell, drunk, into the river and drowned. His daughter, fourteen at the time, went along the river weeping and wailing for seven days and seven nights, then jumped to her death herself. Five days later she surfaced bearing her father's body. The local folk buried them beside the water. Du Shang, prefect of Shangyu, notified the court and hailed the daughter's filial devotion. The prefect had Handan Chun compose this text to mark the event and then had it inscribed on the tablet. Though Handan Chun was only thirteen at the time, he wrote it in one sitting without revising. His monument was set beside the grave and attracted great interest.

"My father, Cai Yong, went to look at it. The sun had already set that day, but he was able to feel the characters in the darkness with his hands. Then he found a brush and wrote eight large characters on the back of the stone. An engraver who recut the stone also cut these eight words." Cao Cao read the words: "Yellow spun silk—a young woman; a distaff grandchild—mortar and pestle." "Can you explain this?" Cao asked Cai Yan. "Though it's by my own father, I'm afraid I cannot," she replied. Cao turned to his counselors and repeated his request. But none of them could unriddle it, either. Then Yang Xiu, his first secretary, stepped forward and offered to interpret the writing, but Cao Cao asked for more time to think about it. He bid Cai Yan good-bye and left the manor with his retinue.

Cao Cao had ridden three *li* when the answer came to him. Laughing, he said to Yang Xiu, "Now, try and explain it." "It is a cryptic saying," Yang Xiu began. "Yellow silk is colored silk; and the graph *silk* beside the the graph *color* makes the graph *superb*. A young woman is a junior miss; and *junior* beside *miss* makes the graph *exquisite*. A distaff grandchild is a daughter's son; and *daughter* beside *son* makes the graph *excellent*. Mortar and pestle are tools that can be held to crush the five spicy herbs; and *hold* beside

spicy forms the graph *words*. In short, we have four words, 'superbly exquisite, excellent words.'" Cao Cao was amazed and said, "Exactly my own thought!" Everyone present sighed in admiration at Yang Xiu's quick mind.

In less than a day Cao Cao reached Nanzheng. Cao Hong welcomed him and detailed Zhang He's failures. "Don't blame him," Cao said. "The fortunes of war are nothing unusual to the military man." Cao Hong continued, "Liu Bei has sent Huang Zhong to attack Dingjun Mountain. Xiahou Yuan know Your Highness is coming and has kept strictly to the defensive." "That only shows weakness," Cao Cao observed, and dispatched a man with his credentials to order Xiahou Yuan to advance. But Liu Ye objected: "Yuan's rigid nature is vulnerable to deception." And so Cao Cao penned a letter for an envoy to present to Xiahou Yuan. It said:

Every general must learn to balance hard and soft tactics. Bravery alone counts for little; bravery is for fighting a single foe. At present, my forces are stationed at Nanzheng. I would like to see a demonstration of your "superb talent." Do not fail to live up to your reputation.

Encouraged by his lord's letter, Xiahou Yuan sent the envoy back and said to Zhang He, "The king of Wei brings his host to Nanzheng to chasten Liu Bei. How can we distinguish ourselves by defensive tactics? Tomorrow I aim to capture Huang Zhong alive!" "Huang Zhong is shrewd and brave, and he has Fa Zheng's help. You'd better be careful. These mountain roads are hard-going. Let's continue our strict defense," Zhang He advised. But Xiahou Yuan answered, "If others win the day, how will you and I face the king of Wei? You continue guarding the mountain; I will go forth to battle." He challenged his commanders, "Who will probe and provoke the enemy?" Xiahou Shang volunteered, and Xiahou Yuan said to him, "Scout their positions. If you make contact, fight to lose. I have the perfect plan. . ." In accordance with his uncle's plan, Xiahou Shang went down from the camp on Dingjun Mountain with three thousand troops.

Huang Zhong and Fa Zheng were stationed at the approach to Dingjun. Although their repeated taunts had failed to make Xiahou Yuan come out and fight, they had decided against an attack up the mountain because the narrow, uncertain paths made the enemy positions difficult to reconnoitre. But that day, informed of the descent of Cao's troops, Huang Zhong was ready to meet the enemy. A garrison commander, Chen Shi, volunteered to make the first stand. Delighted, Huang Zhong gave Chen Shi one thousand men, which he deployed into line at the approach to the mountain. Xiahou Shang and Chen Shi engaged. Shang feigned defeat and fled; Chen Shi gave chase but, bombarded by timber and rocks from both sides, could not advance. As he began to turn around, Xiahou Yuan's troops surprised and overwhelmed him. Chen Shi was captured, and most of his men surrendered. Those who escaped brought the news back to Huang Zhong.

Huang Zhong and Fa Zheng took counsel. "Yuan is a volatile man," said Fa Zheng. "He trusts to his courage and rarely plans well. We must inspire our troops to break camp and advance, bivouacking at each stage, then draw Xiahou Yuan into battle and capture him. This is what military science calls 'reversing the roles of host and guest.'" Huang Zhong adopted the ruse, rewarding the army heavily beforehand; the valley resounded with the men's oaths to fight to the death. Huang Zhong broke camp and went forward, staging a few days at each point along the way.

Xiahou Yuan heard of Huang Zhong's movements and wanted to engage. But Zhang He warned, "This is the 'reversing host and guest' ruse. Take no offensive action or you

will suffer defeat." Yuan ignored the advice and sent Xiahou Shang down with several thousand men. When they came directly in front of the camp, Huang Zhong rode forth, sword high, and in a single encounter captured his man and brought him back. Shang's troops dispersed and reported the defeat to Xiahou Yuan, who immediately sent an envoy offering to exchange Chen Shi for Xiahou Shang. Huang Zhong agreed and set the exchange for the following day before the opposed lines.

The next day the two armies deployed in a broad valley between the mountains. Huang Zhong and Xiahou Yuan rode to the bannered opening of their respective lines, each with his prisoner dressed in ordinary clothes. At the sound of the drums, the prisoners dashed across the field to their own sides. But before Xiahou Shang reached safety, Huang Zhong had shot him in the back with an arrow. In a fury, Xiahou Yuan charged Huang Zhong. This was the moment Huang Zhong had been hoping for. The two generals closed in combat more than twenty times. Suddenly the gong sounded in Cao's camp, and Xiahou Yuan wheeled and returned to his side, with Huang Zhong in hot pursuit. Yuan asked the keeper of the line why he had sounded the gong. "I saw Shu banners where the hills dip," he replied. "Fearing ambush, I summoned you back." Yuan believed the explanation and did not go forth again.

Huang Zhong moved closer to Dingjun Mountain; then he consulted with Fa Zheng. Pointing west, Fa Zheng said, "West of Dingjun, a high mountain with arduous roads on all sides overlooks the enemy. If we gain control of it, Dingjun is as good as in our hands." Huang Zhong observed the small plateau at the top and noted how lightly it was defended. At the second watch, to the clang of gongs and the roll of drums, he stormed the summit. The defender, Du Xi, Xiahou Yuan's lieutenant, had only a few hundred men. He saw Huang Zhong's force surging up and abandoned his position. Huang Zhong took the summit; Dingjun Mountain was directly opposite. Fa Zheng said, "General, defend the middle section of the mountain. I will hold the summit and signal with a white flag when Xiahou Yuan arrives. You must restrain your troops until he tires and lets down his guard. When I raise a red flag, descend and attack. Fatigued, their soldiers will be no match for our fresh forces." Huang Zhong was delighted with this plan.

Du Xi, after being driven from the mountain, returned to report his defeat to Xiahou Yuan. Angrily, Yuan said, "If they control that mountain, we have to go out and fight." Zhang He, however, objected. "This is one of Fa Zheng's tricks. Hold your position and do not show yourself," he said. "How can I do that when they have a full view of our positions?" Yuan asked and dismissed Zhang He's protest.

Xiahou Yuan surrounded the hostile hill with a company of soldiers who hurled up taunts to provoke battle. But Fa Zheng, positioned at the summit, raised the white flag warning Huang Zhong not to respond to the volleys of curses. After midday Fa Zheng observed a slackening of the enemy's discipline and a waning of their zeal for battle, for many of them had dismounted and were idling on the ground. So Fa Zheng raised the red flag, and Huang Zhong—to beating drums and blaring horns—descended at the head of his men with all the force of an avalanche. Before Xiahou Yuan could defend himself, Huang Zhong had chased him to his command canopy. Zhong's shouts rang out like thunder. Overpowered, Xiahou Yuan fell to Huang Zhong's sturdy sword, which severed his head and part of his shoulder. A poet of later times left these lines in admiration of Huang Zhong's feat:

He faced the foe, though old and greyed,
But, oh, what wondrous might 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!
 Yuan's head won him ample fame
 For adding to the imperial realm.

The death of Xiahou Yuan put Cao Cao's troops to chaotic flight. Huang Zhong followed up his advantage and headed for Dingjun Mountain. Zhang He tried to defend it, but a combined assault by Huang Zhong and Chen Shi forced him from the field. Zhang He's escape was blocked, however, by a band of men that flashed into view along the side of the mountain. The awesome general at their head shouted, "I am Zhao Zilong of Changshan." Zhang He panicked and led his troops hurrying toward Dingjun. He was met by Xiahou Yuan's lieutenant, Du Xi, who told him that Liu Feng and Meng Da had already seized Dingjun Mountain. In great distress Zhang He and Du Xi camped their broken forces along the River Han and sent a man to Cao Cao to report the day's losses.

As he wept and wailed for Xiahou Yuan, Cao Cao realized the meaning of Guan Lu's predictions. "Three and eight run crisscross" meant the twenty-fourth year of Jian An. "A yellow pig meets a tiger" was fulfilled when Yuan died in the first month of the *ji hai* year.³ "South of the outpost" referred to the battle south of Dingjun Mountain. Finally, "you will lose a limb" expressed the fraternal love between Xiahou Yuan and himself. Cao Cao sent men to look for Guan Lu, but the seer was not to be found.

Hatred for Huang Zhong took possession of Cao Cao, and he personally led the main army to Dingjun Mountain to exact vengeance for Xiahou Yuan's death. The vanguard of this force was led by Xu Huang. When Cao Cao reached the River Han, Zhang He and Du Xi welcomed him and said, "Dingjun Mountain is lost. Let's move our supplies on Mount Micang over to the campsites on the northern hills before we advance." Cao Cao approved this measure.

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At Jiameng Pass, Huang Zhong presented himself before Liu Xuande and announced his victory over Xiahou Yuan. Delighted, Xuande made Huang Zhong Chief General Who Conquers the West. A great celebration banquet followed.

Suddenly a garrison commander, Zhang Zhu, reported: "Cao Cao is coming with two hundred thousand under his personal command to avenge Xiahou Yuan. And Zhang He is moving their supplies over to the foot of the hills north of the river." Kongming said, "Cao has halted because he needs more supplies for so large a force. We need someone to get inside his camp, burn out his grain and fodder, and seize his transport wagons; that should blunt his mettle." Huang Zhong replied, "I volunteer for this task." "Cao Cao is no Xiahou Yuan," warned Kongming, "do not be rash." And Xuande added, "Although Xiahou Yuan was their chief general, he was no more than one bold warrior and hardly compares to Zhang He, whose elimination would be ten times more valuable to us." Aroused, Huang Zhong answered, "I will take his head!" Kongming said, "You and Zhao Zilong should share the command of one detachment. Consult one another on your course of action and then set out and see who achieves the greater merit." Huang Zhong agreed and went forth. Kongming ordered Zhang Zhu to accompany him as a lieutenant commander.

Zilong said to Huang Zhong, "Cao Cao's two hundred thousand are stationed among ten camps. General, in front of His Lordship you committed yourself to seize their

grain—no trifling matter. But what plan will you use?" "Let me go first," Huang Zhong said. "Rather, you wait while I go," countered Zilong. "I am the commanding general," Huang Zhong replied, "you are the lieutenant. How can you challenge me for the lead?" "What are you quibbling for?" Zhao Zilong retorted. "You and I labor equally for our lord. We will cast lots to see who goes first." Huang Zhong agreed—and won the draw. "Since you have the lead," Zilong said, "I will give you my full support. Let us set a time for your return; I will hold back my men until then. After that, I will reinforce you." "Well and good," Huang Zhong said. The two commanders agreed upon the midday period. Zilong returned to his camp and told a unit commander, Zhang Yi, "Tomorrow, Huang Zhong will try to capture the enemy's supplies. If he's not back by the end of the midday period, I shall have to go and help him. Our camp on the River Han is quite vulnerable. If I go, you will have to defend the forts vigilantly and make no risky moves." Zhang Yi agreed.

Huang Zhong, meanwhile, had returned to camp and informed his lieutenant, Zhang Zhu, "I have killed Xiahou Yuan, and Zhang He has lost the will to fight. Tomorrow I go to raid their supply depot. That means that only five hundred will be left here guarding the camp. You will come with me. At the third watch everyone is to eat a full meal; at the fourth we set out, advance to the foot of the mountain, seize Zhang He and the supplies both." Zhang Zhu accepted his orders.

That night Huang Zhong led the way and Zhang Zhu took the rear as they quietly crossed the River Han, reaching the foot of the mountains by dawn. In the early light they saw great mounds of grain. The few soldiers on guard spotted the western troops and fled. Huang Zhong ordered his men to dismount and pile kindling atop the grain. They were about to start the fires when Zhang He arrived. A wild battle ensued. Cao Cao sent Xu Huang to reinforce Zhang He. Xu Huang succeeded in trapping Huang Zhong. Zhang Zhu, his lieutenant, tried to escape with three hundred men but was intercepted by a detachment led by General Wen Ping. More of Cao's troops came up to the rear, and Zhang Zhu was surrounded.

During this time Zhao Zilong was in camp waiting for the midday hours. When Huang Zhong did not return, he donned his fighting gear and leaped on his horse. Three thousand men followed him to the grain depot. Before setting out, Zilong had said to Zhang Yi, "Guard this camp well, placing enough archers and crossbowmen along each side." Zhang Yi had repeatedly voiced his understanding. Zhao Zilong now hoisted high his spear and charged the enemy. But a subcommander of Wen Ping's named Murong Lie came flying directly at him, sword dancing in the air. Zhao Zilong killed him with a single spear thrust. As Cao's forces retired, Zilong broke through the rings of troops. Then another detachment appeared before him, this headed by Jiao Bing, a general of Wei. "Where are the western troops?" Zilong shouted to his opponent. "Slaughtered, to a man," came the reply. Zilong charged furiously, ran his man through, and scattered his troops. Finally he reached the northern hills where he saw Zhang He and Xu Huang surrounding Huang Zhong. The encirclement had lasted many hours. Zilong gave a great whoop and plunged into the rings of soldiers, thrusting left and lunging right as if working on empty air. His deft spear work was as hard to follow as the scattering of pear blossoms or the dancing of snowflakes. Trembling with panic, Zhang He and Xu Huang shrank from battle, enabling Zilong to pull Huang Zhong to safety, fighting as he broke away. No one dared to block his path.

From a high vantage point Cao Cao watched the action. "Who is that commander?" he exclaimed. Someone replied, "Zhao Zilong of Changshan." "So the hero of Steepslope

still lives!" Cao said and ordered his men to take care in engaging him. After Zilong had rescued Huang Zhong and broken through the encirclement, one of the soldiers pointed and said, "Zhang Zhu must be trapped to the southeast." Instead of returning to camp, Zilong headed southeast to save him. The opposing soldiers recognized the name "Zhao Zilong of Changshan" on his banner. Knowing of his valor and exploits, many scurried for safety; and Zilong was able to rescue Zhang Zhu. After watching Zhao Zilong carry out the double rescue unopposed, Cao Cao, seething with indignation, took his commanders in pursuit of the great warrior.

Zhang Yi welcomed Zilong back to camp; then, seeing the dust clouds of pursuit in the distance, he said to Zilong, "The enemy is coming. Seal up the gates and defend from the watchtowers." "No such thing," Zilong shot back. "Have you forgotten Steepslope, when, with one spear and one mount, I stared down Cao's multitudes? What should we fear today when we have men and leaders?" So saying, Zilong deployed archers and crossbowmen in ambush trenches beyond the perimeter of the camp. At the same time he had those inside the camp down their spears and flags and put away drum and gong. Then with a single spear, Zilong rode alone to the front of the entrance.

Zhang He and Xu Huang had pursued Zilong to his camp. In the fading daylight, they noted that no flags were flying and the drums were still. They also saw Zilong, riding alone with his spear, just outside the open entrance to the camp. Cao's two generals were debating what to do when Cao Cao himself rode up and pressed them to advance. At Cao's order the troops, yelling madly, rushed headlong toward the camp. But something about Zilong's motionless stance made Cao's troops stop in their tracks and turn around. Then Zilong waved his spear, and the hidden archers and bowmen stood up in their trenches, releasing volleys of arrows.

By this time it was dark and Cao's troops could not tell the number of their enemies. Cao Cao first guided his horse around and fled; but behind him a great cacophony, mingled with horn and drum, announced the pursuing western soldiers. The northern troops stumbled over each other in confusion as they thronged toward the edge of the River Han, and many were lost in its waters. Three contingents—Zilong's, Huang Zhong's, and Zhang Zhu's—harried the fleeing army. Cao Cao himself was in headlong flight when the two contingents of Liu Feng and Meng Da swept down from Mount Micang and burned the supplies. Cao Cao abandoned the supplies he had recently moved to the northern hills and raced back to Nanzheng. Zhang He and Xu Huang, unable to make a stand, abandoned their positions as well.

Zilong occupied Cao Cao's camp; Huang Zhong seized grain and fodder and occupied enemy positions on the River Han. In addition, they took great quantities of the military equipment left behind. The victory was reported to Xuande, who went to the river, accompanied by Kongming. There they asked Zilong's soldiers how he had fought and were informed in detail how he had rescued Huang Zhong and held the line at the River Han. Xuande was delighted and, after looking over the arduous slopes, said appreciatively to Kongming, "The man has valor through and through." A poet of later times left this verse:

Then at Steepslope, 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 sore.
Zhao Zilong of Changshan—
“Valor through and through.”

On this occasion Xuande dubbed Zilong “General of Tiger Might,” rewarded commanders and troops generously, and feasted late into the night.

Suddenly a report came that Cao Cao had sent another large force through the paths of Ye Gorge toward the River Han. Smiling, Xuande said, “Cao Cao will accomplish nothing by that. I am certain we will take the river,” and led his troops west of the river to meet the enemy.

Cao Cao ordered Xu Huang to be the vanguard for the deciding battle. At that moment someone stepped forward and said, “I am well versed in the topography here. Let me help General Xu destroy the westerners.” Cao Cao regarded the man: Wang Ping (Zijun) from Dangqu in Baxi, currently serving as a general of the Standard. Cao Cao was delighted and appointed Wang Ping lieutenant commander of the vanguard to assist Xu Huang. Cao Cao had his own troops stationed north of Dingjun Mountain.

Xu Huang and Wang Ping led their men to the River Han. Huang told his men to cross and take up positions on the opposite shore. Wang Ping said, “In an emergency will you be able to get back to this side?” Xu Huang answered, “The great Han general Han Xin once deployed his men with their backs to the water, forcing them to fight to the death so they might survive.” “I think you’re wrong,” Wang Ping continued. “When Han Xin used that plan, he foresaw that the enemy would have no plan of action. Can you tell what Zhao Zilong and Huang Zhong will do?” But Xu Huang replied, “You lead the infantry. Watch me defeat them with the cavalry.” Then he had a floating bridge set up and quickly passed over the River Han to do battle. Indeed:

The foolish northern men of Wei made Han Xin their guiding light;
They little knew that the chief minister of Shu would be another Zhang Liang.⁴

What was the outcome?

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