

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS COMBAT PROWESS ENCYCLOPEDIA

ENDING
SIX
CENTURIES
OF DEBATE
RESTORING
THE MOST
AUTHENTIC
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THROUGH
TWELVE
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THE
SUMMIT
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MINE!

HOW
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WAS
LU BU
REALLY
THE
STRONGEST?

SHI NIAN / AUTHOR

MO STRATEGIST / WU STRATEGIST / EDITORIAL REVIEW

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

COMBAT

PROWESS ENCYCLOPEDIA

SPECIAL	CHIEF
STRATEGY	COMBAT
CONSULTANT	PROWESS
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SHI NIAN
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English Edition

PDF E-Book Edition

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YEARS HAS MAO ZONGGANG MISLED YOU?

WAS LU BU REALLY THE STRONGEST?

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This mainline e-book edition contains the complete mainline content and features a cover different from that of the print edition. It does not include the print-edition-exclusive hidden ending, the collector's-edition-exclusive Chronicle of the Heroines' Martial Trials, or the collector's-edition-exclusive Combat Prowess Apex: Plate Zero.



For more than six centuries since *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* first appeared, debate over the relative strength of its warriors has never ceased. It has even evolved into a distinctive cultural phenomenon throughout the Chinese-speaking world. From the teahouses and taverns of old to today's online forums, whenever the civil officials and fierce generals of the Three Kingdoms are discussed, people inevitably argue over the saying: "There is no absolute first in letters, and no true second in arms."

With a literary brush of extraordinary power, Luo Guanzhong portrayed an age in which martial achievement reached its zenith, endowing historical figures with combat exploits that transcended the ordinary. Yet literature is often emotional, impressionistic, and evocative. When Guan Yu's "might of a warrior worth ten thousand men" meets Huang Zhong's skill of "piercing a willow leaf at a hundred paces"; when Xu Chu's "boundless strength" clashes with Zhang Fei's "heaven-shaking roar"; or when Taishi Ci's "valor in capturing an enemy commander" confronts Sun Ce, the "reincarnation of Xiang Yu," how should their relative strength be determined? This question was the original inspiration behind the compilation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms Combat Prowess Encyclopedia*.

The author fully recognizes that combat prowess cannot be reduced to a single numerical dimension, much less to a simplistic and rigid attack statistic in a modern video game. Within the narrative world of the novel, it is an extraordinarily complex composite. It is the astonishing endurance Dian Wei and Xu Chu displayed while fighting for hundreds of rounds without a decisive outcome; the thunderous burst of power with which Guan Yunchang slew Hua Xiong before the wine had cooled; and the all-encompassing courage of Zhao Zilong as he carried the infant heir through the armies at Changban and broke out against overwhelming odds.

This book seeks to establish a comparatively objective and comprehensive analytical system. The author sets aside subjective emotional preferences and rejects the use of "popular opinion" as a basis for judging combat prowess. Instead, every battle is examined rigorously from the original text in a manner resembling a frame-by-frame analysis. The book considers the unforgiving effects of age on a warrior's fighting ability, comparing the true substance of the veteran Huang Zhong's saber technique with Guan Yu's beneath the walls of Changsha. It examines the gains in endurance and mobility provided by elite mounts such as Red Hare, as well as the combat advantages conferred by legendary weapons such as the Green Dragon Crescent Blade and Lu Bu's Fangtian Halberd. It also incorporates less visible variables, including shifts in morale, battlefield terrain, feigned retreats, tactical deception, and psychological resilience.



Nor is the author's attention confined to the very summit of the pyramid. The analysis ranges from the Flying General Lu Bu's courage in facing the Three Heroes alone before Hulao Pass to Wen Yang's astonishing feat of driving back a mighty army single-handedly in the later era. It encompasses the renowned achievements of the Five Tiger Generals, whose fame shook all under heaven, as well as second-tier warriors such as Gao Shun and Leng Bao, whose names were buried beneath the dust of history despite moments of extraordinary strength. It even extends to the female warriors concealed within the chaos of the age. Through meticulous organization and cross-comparison, the author seeks to reconstruct a clearly layered and logically coherent pyramid of Three Kingdoms combat prowess, ensuring that every judgment concerning a warrior's strength rests upon demonstrable evidence.

The writing of this book represents the author's highest tribute to the original Luo-text tradition, as well as a deeper interpretation of the very meaning of martial ability. Here, readers will encounter no more vague and generalized claims of warriors "fighting for three hundred rounds." Instead, they will find precise deductions and clarified conclusions grounded in the internal logic of the text. This is a desk reference written for every Three Kingdoms enthusiast and game development studio, and a key to unlocking the mysteries of combat prowess within the novel.

Let us now open these pages and journey back to that age of clashing weapons and thundering warhorses, where rational data analysis meets an emotional longing for history, and where the martial legends of the heroic age may be rediscovered and redefined.

Perhaps Luo Guanzhong's true message was this:

"There can be a foremost figure in letters, and there can be a strongest warrior in arms"—with Kongming standing first in intellect, and the mightiest warrior reigning supreme in combat.

Let Shi Nian be your guide.

Follow me.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN



前言

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a monumental work of literature created upon the historical foundation of Records of the Three Kingdoms. Its influence on later Three Kingdoms culture has been immeasurable. It is commonly said to be “seven parts fact and three parts fiction”; the author, however, believes that its true nature is closer to “five parts fact and five parts fiction.” To trace the work back to its source and determine the true relative strength of its warriors, one must regard the original intent of Luo Guanzhong as the ultimate authority. Only then can the essence of its combat prowess rankings be fully understood.

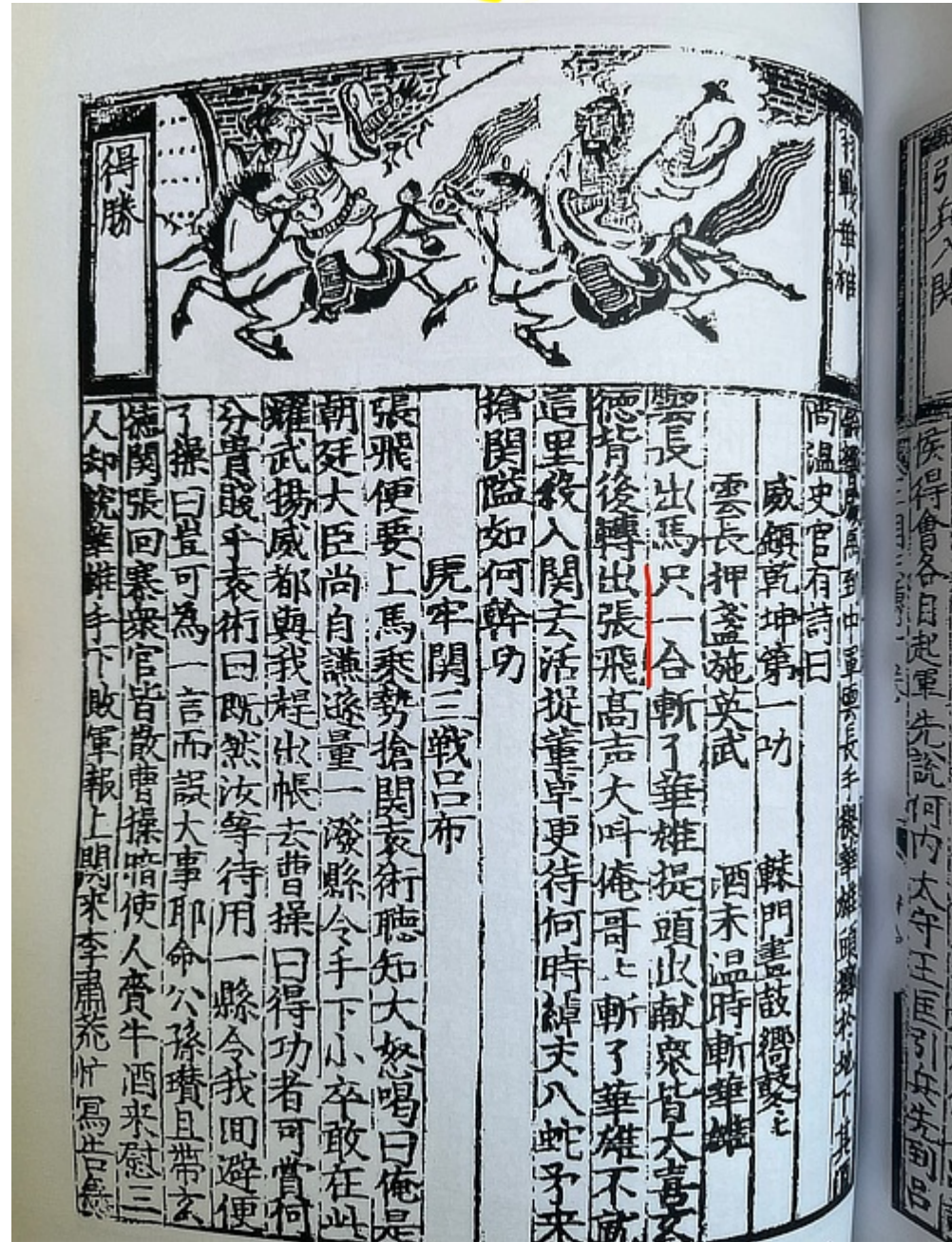
The version most widely circulated today is the “Mao edition,” revised and abridged by Mao Zonggang and his father during the Qing dynasty. They extensively deleted or altered many crucial passages and round counts involving clashes between warriors. These revisions severely distorted Luo Guanzhong’s original system of combat prowess. As a result, anyone relying solely on the Mao edition would be fundamentally incapable of deriving a hierarchy of strength consistent with Luo’s original intent. For this reason, this book categorically rejects the Mao edition as the standard upon which its combat prowess rankings are based.

Note: Whenever this book quotes a passage marked 【Original Text from the Novel..】 , the edition named in parentheses afterward—such as “(X Edition)” —indicates the textual source of that passage. From this point onward, any quotation marked 【Original Text from the Novel...】 without an edition specified in parentheses should be understood as coming from the Ye edition.

Consider, for example, the famous episode “Slaying Hua Xiong Before the Wine Cooled”:

【Yunchang rode forth and slew Hua Xiong in a single round.】
(Ye edition)

The original text of the Ming-dynasty Ye edition explicitly records that Guan Yu slew Hua Xiong in only “one round.” Yet this decisive phrase—sufficient to establish that Guan Yu at Hulao Pass was stronger than Lu Bu at Hulao Pass—was ruthlessly deleted from the Mao edition. See the passage underlined in red in the image below.



Source: The Ye Fengchun Edition of Sanguozhi Shizhuan Preserved in Spain, Volume I

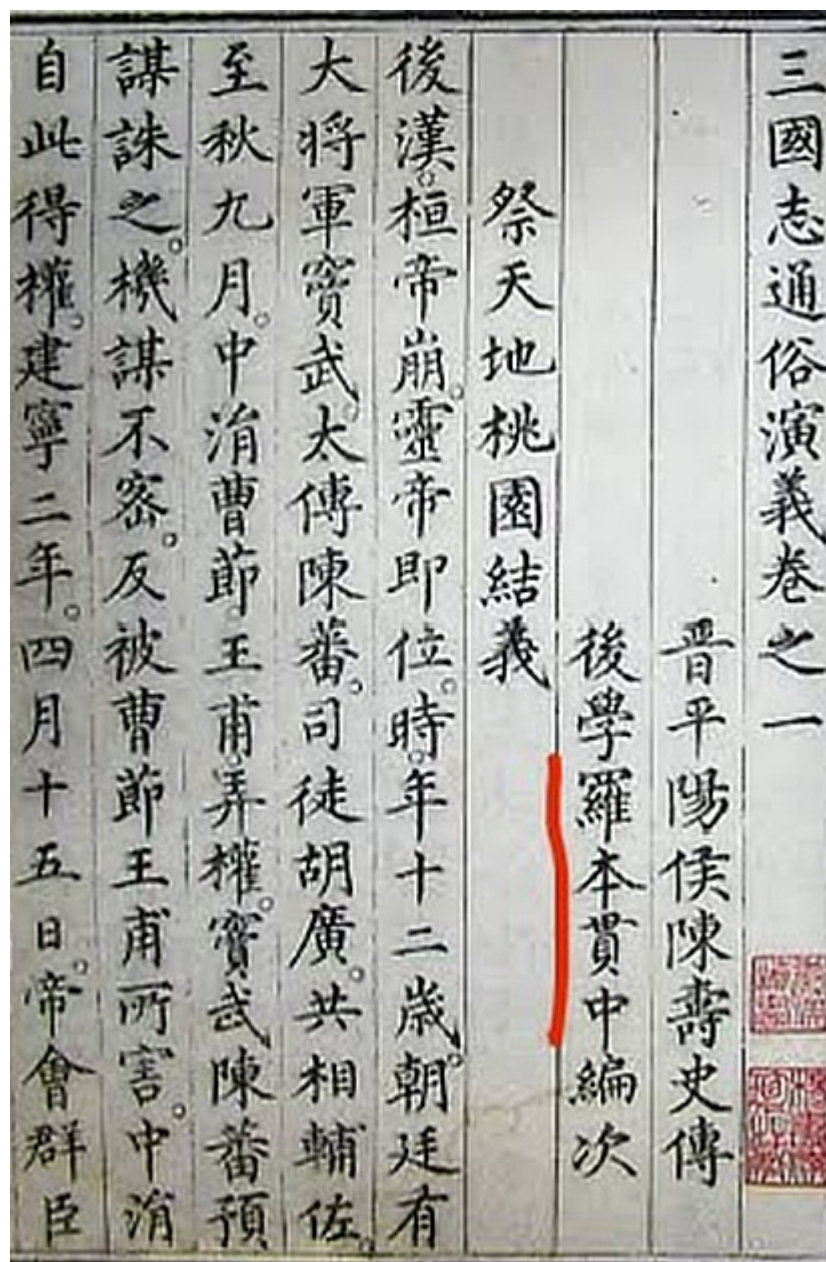
Throughout the Mao edition, major mutilations and alterations of combat-prowess data and the original text—of precisely this kind—are far too numerous to count. Such revisions unquestionably constitute a serious usurpation of Luo Guanzhong's original conception of martial prowess. Had Mao Zonggang and his father created an entirely new Three Kingdoms novel of their own instead of grafting their revisions onto Luo's original work and privately deleting or rewriting crucial battles, they might perhaps have escaped the condemnation of later combat-prowess critics.

For this reason, truly rigorous and experienced analysts of combat prowess generally cast aside the Mao edition as worthless and trace the text back to earlier editions. Only by doing so can Luo Guanzhong's original spirit of combat prowess be restored in its authentic form.

Admittedly, the Mao edition deserves credit for refining the prose and helping Romance of the Three Kingdoms attain its exalted status in literary history. Yet to treat it as the authoritative standard for ranking combat prowess in the novel is no different from climbing a tree in search of fish; as a source for evaluating combat prowess, it is virtually worthless. However elegant its language may be, the Mao edition remains a derivative work that appropriates the achievements of another and distorts the original system. Mao Zonggang and his father were not the original creators. At most, they were literary manipulators—thieving adapters who

tampered with another man's work—and they have no right whatsoever to speak for the true martial order of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

In conclusion, the combat-prowess pyramid established in this book is intended to vindicate Luo Guanzhong's original conception. It will never endorse the errors introduced by Mao Zonggang and his father.



Source: Sanguozhi Tongsu Yanyi (Jiajing Edition)—by Luo Guanzhong, the widely acknowledged original author of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

The author has devoted more than twenty years to studying combat prowess in Romance of the Three Kingdoms and has always held a particular affection for the Five Tiger Generals as portrayed by Luo Guanzhong. Over the course of this long research journey, the author came to recognize a startling truth that overturns conventional belief: Luo Guanzhong himself never portrayed Lu Bu as the strongest warrior in the novel. For this reason, the author has gathered a lifetime of effort into Romance of the Three Kingdoms Combat Prowess Encyclopedia, hoping to reveal the true hierarchy of strength to readers everywhere, set the record straight, correct long-standing misconceptions, and fully restore Luo Guanzhong's original intent behind the combat prowess rankings.

In addition, this book interweaves a series of simulated “dream matchups,” reconstructed through war-game analysis based on each warrior's defining traits and combat data. These battles unfold upon a dark Three Kingdoms stage that fuses “ferocious ink-wash art” with a cyberpunk aesthetic, designed to resolve the lingering regret that many warriors in the original novel never had the

opportunity to determine who was truly superior. Set amid the echoes that remain after the Three Kingdoms were unified under the Jin dynasty, these stories may be regarded either as an extended parallel universe of Romance of the Three Kingdoms or as the definitive finale to this magnificent Three Kingdoms epic.

I still remember how, as a child, I would linger in neighborhood bookstores, hiding among the shelves as I read Romance of the Three Kingdoms. One question was always playing out in my mind: Who was truly the Greatest Warrior Under Heaven? The boundless childhood fascination I felt for warriors meeting in single combat before the battle lines, determined to prove once and for all who was superior, has now finally taken shape in words and become this book. To fulfill that childhood dream is one of the greatest joys of my life.

I would like to offer my special thanks to my beloved wife and family for their patience, understanding, and support; to my exceptional assistants, Mo Strategist and Wu Strategist, for their invaluable help; and to every contributor whose tireless efforts helped bring this work to life. This book embodies the dedication and labor of many people. Above all, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to every reader who opens its pages. May this monumental work prove worthy of your expectations.

As a Taiwanese author with a deep passion for Three Kingdoms culture, I sincerely welcome fellow enthusiasts from around the world to exchange ideas and engage in discussion with me. Please scan the QR code below to join my dedicated LINE community, where free Three Kingdoms resources are available:



Romance of the Three Kingdoms Combat Prowess Encyclopedia Readers' Martial Training Camp

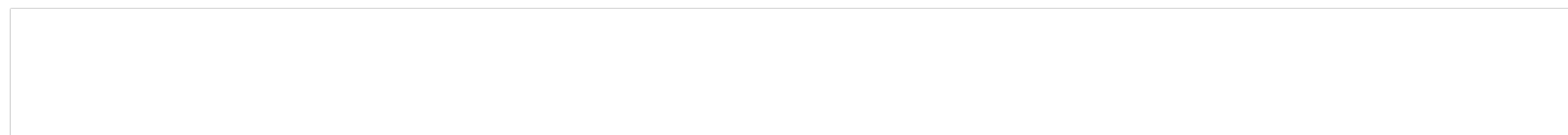
Author's Email: jiarongli130@gmail.com

I warmly invite heroes from every quarter to join the community and take part in this grand gathering. Whether discussing combat-prowess simulations based on the novel or actual martial encounters recorded in official history, all are welcome to speak freely. May every reader enjoy good health, smooth fortune, and success in all endeavors.

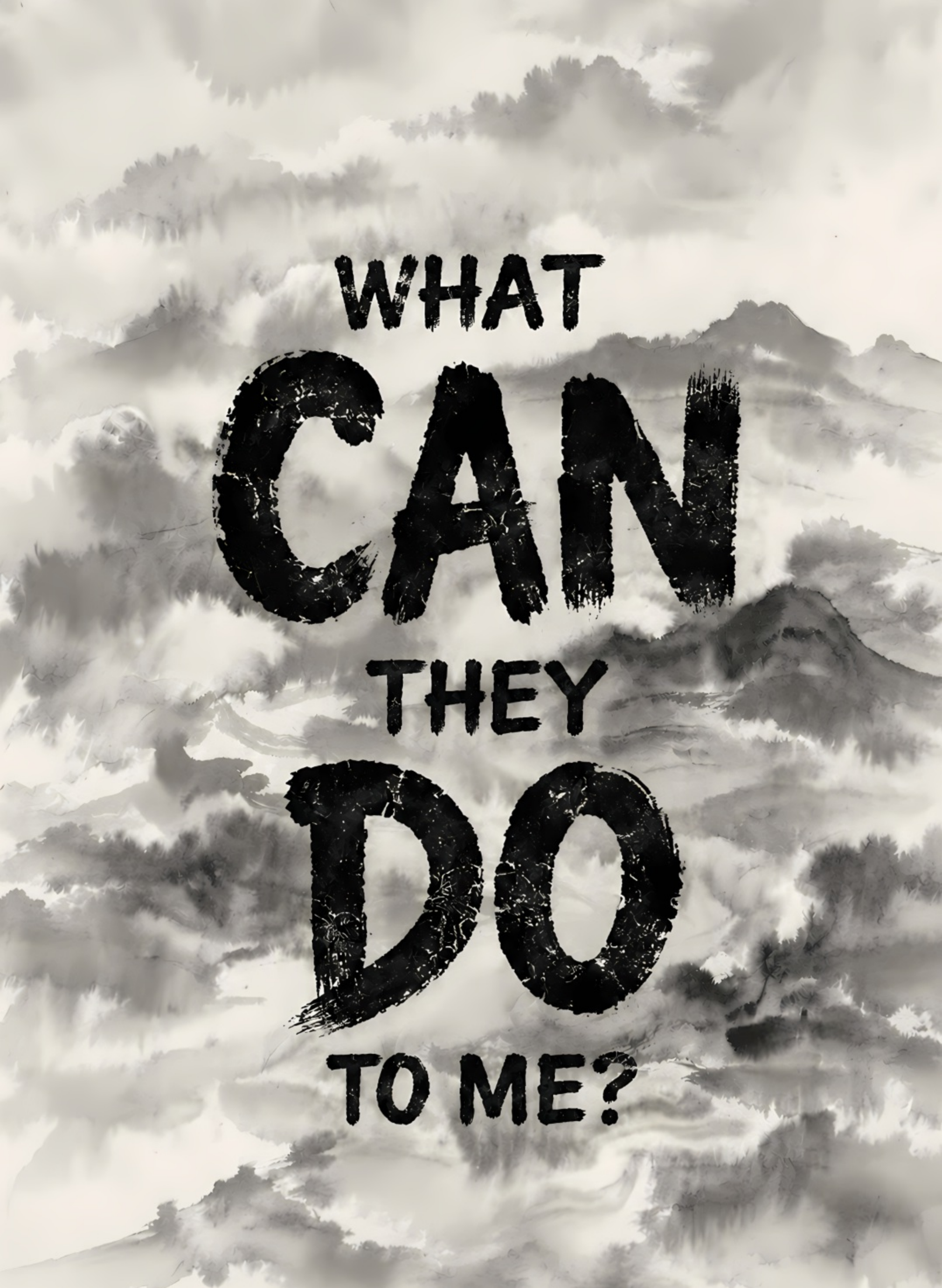


Finally, I would like to offer one essential reading recommendation: before beginning the main text, please be sure to consult the appendix on P. [642], which contains the Master Table of All 547 Battle Cases in Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This will provide a foundational understanding of combat prowess. Every combat-prowess assessment and analysis in this book is built upon these ironclad records of actual combat—all of which originated from the pen of Luo Guanzhong.

After all, the relative combat prowess of the warriors in the novel must ultimately be determined by its original author, Luo Guanzhong.



First Draft Completed | April 23, 2025



WHAT
CAN

THEY

DO

TO ME?

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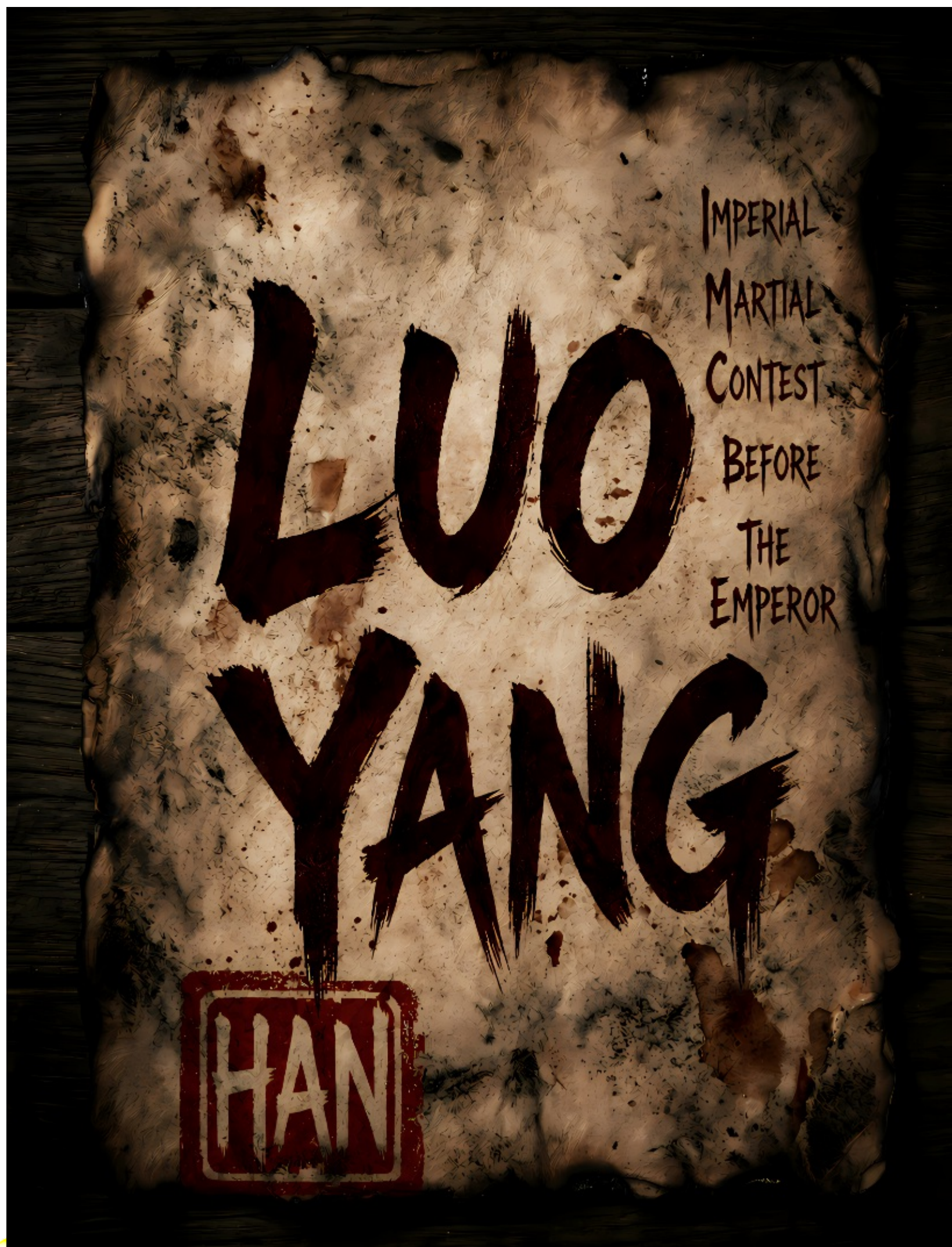
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THE
FIRST
DUEL
BEFORE
HULAO
PASS

SHI
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WHEN
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MEET,
THE
BRAVER
MAN
PREVAILS

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The Origins of Romance of the Three Kingdoms



Source: Sanguozhi Pinghua—a Three Kingdoms novel written before Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Preface: The Origins and Evolution of Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Sanguozhi Pinghua was, in fact, the prototype of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Many of the novel's best-known fictional episodes—including “The Three Heroes Battle Lu Bu,” “The Origins of Diaochan,” and “Kongming Borrows the East Wind”—all originated in Sanguozhi Pinghua. Luo Guanzhong drew upon its narrative model and went on to create an entirely new Three Kingdoms epic. The following passages present the most important original descriptions of combat prowess from Sanguozhi Pinghua, allowing readers to compare them with their counterparts in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

I. The Original Characterizations of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei

【There was a man whose surname was Guan and whose given name was Yu, with the courtesy name Yunchang. He was a native of Xieliang in Puzhou, Pingyang. He had majestic brows, phoenix-like eyes, a curling beard, a face resembling purple jade, and stood nine chi and two cun tall.】

Analysis: Sanguozhi Pinghua describes Guan Yu's face as resembling “purple jade,” which differs from the famous “red-faced” image presented in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

【There was also a man whose surname was Zhang and whose given name was Fei, with the courtesy name Yide. He was a native of Fanyang in Zhuo Commandery, in the state of Yan. He had a leopard-like head, large round eyes, a swallow-like jaw, and a tiger's beard, and stood more than nine chi tall.】

Analysis: In Sanguozhi Pinghua, Zhang Fei stands more than nine chi tall, whereas Romance of the Three Kingdoms reduces his height to eight chi.

II. Hulao Pass: Zhang Fei's Battle of Apotheosis

【A messenger reported that Marquis Wen, Lu Bu, was challenging the defenders at Hulao Pass... Zhang Fei fought Lu Bu for twenty rounds, with neither gaining the upper hand. Enraged, Lord Guan spurred his horse forward and swung his blade, joining Zhang Fei against Lu Bu. Unable to stand by, the First Lord drew his paired swords, and the three horsemen fought Lu Bu, who suffered a crushing defeat and fled northwest toward Hulao Pass.】

Analysis: This is the famous episode known in Romance of the Three Kingdoms as “The Three Heroes Battle Lu Bu.” Its narrative framework was in fact drawn from Sanguozhi Pinghua. What follows, however, develops in an entirely different direction.

【The following day, Lu Bu descended from the pass and shouted, “Big-Eyed Fellow, come forth!” Zhang Fei flew into a rage, rode out with his divine eighteen-chi spear in hand, opened his great round eyes, and charged straight at Lu Bu. Their two horses met, and they fought for thirty rounds without a decisive outcome. Zhang Fei had always delighted in fierce combat; now that he had encountered a worthy opponent, he fought for another thirty rounds, driving Lu Bu back until his battle standards became tangled and obscured his face. Zhang Fei appeared like a god of war. Fear entered Lu Bu's heart, and he wheeled his horse back into the pass, shut the gates tight, and refused to come out again.】

Analysis: During the Battle of Hulao Pass in Sanguozhi Pinghua, Zhang Fei needed only sixty rounds to “defeat” Lu Bu and even caused Lu Bu to lose his nerve. Luo Guanzhong, however, did not adopt this portrayal of “Zhang Fei defeating Lu Bu” in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

III. The Mystery of Diaochan's Origins

【Terrified, Diaochan hurriedly knelt and dared not conceal the truth. She explained the circumstances in full: “This humble woman's family name is Ren, and my childhood name is Diaochan. My husband is Lu Bu. We became separated in Lintao Prefecture and have not seen each other since. That is why I was burning incense.” The Chancellor was overjoyed and declared, “The one who shall restore peace to the Han realm is this woman!”】

Analysis: Sanguozhi Pinghua was the first work to create the character of Diaochan, 27 whom Luo Guanzhong later adopted. Notably, in the setting of Sanguozhi Pinghua,

Diaochan's original family name was Ren, and she was already Lu Bu's lawful wife.

IV. Zhang Fei Defeats Lu Bu Three Times

【The following day, Zhang Fei once again rode out with eighteen horsemen and engaged Lu Bu in battle. Lu Bu said, “This rebel general has come and gone several times; he must be seeking reinforcements.” Marquis Wen could not hold him off, and Zhang Fei led his eighteen horsemen in a charge through the formation.】

Analysis: This marks the third time Zhang Fei defeated Lu Bu in Sanguozhi Pinghua. By contrast, Romance of the Three Kingdoms revised this passage to read, “Lu Bu dared not press him.” This provides clear proof of the original combat-prowess setting intended by the author of Sanguozhi Pinghua: Zhang Fei was stronger than Lu Bu.

V. Xiahou Dun's Terrifying Strength

【Xiahou Dun rode out to fight Lu Bu. After only a few rounds, Lu Bu feigned defeat, and Xiahou Dun pursued him closely. Lu Bu loosed an arrow that struck Xiahou Dun directly in the left eye. Xiahou Dun fell from his horse and pulled out the arrow. He declared, “The essence of my father and the blood of my mother cannot be discarded!” He then swallowed his own eyeball in a single gulp, remounted his horse, and resumed the fight. Lu Bu said, “This man is no ordinary human being.” Lu Bu suffered a crushing defeat.】

Analysis: In Sanguozhi Pinghua, it was Lu Bu himself who shot Xiahou Dun in the eye; Romance of the Three Kingdoms changed the archer to Cao Xing. Yet after erupting with renewed ferocity, Xiahou Dun actually “crushed Lu Bu.” Comparing their battle records, Xiahou Dun defeated Lu Bu after “only a few rounds,” surpassing Zhang Fei, who required “sixty rounds” to defeat him. This demonstrates that, within the combat-prowess system of Sanguozhi Pinghua, Xiahou Dun was far stronger than Zhang Fei.

【Three days later, Lu Bu once again issued a challenge. Zhang Fei fought Lu Bu for more than three hundred rounds, with neither gaining the upper hand.】

Analysis: This was their fourth encounter, in which Zhang Fei and Lu Bu fought to a draw over more than three hundred rounds.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei > Lu Bu

VI. Zhao Yun, Yan Liang, and Wen Chou

【The Imperial Uncle descended the steps and recognized the visitor as Zhao Zilong of Hengshan. Zhao Yun greeted him and was invited up the steps. Xuande recounted the injustice he had suffered. Zhao Yun said, “Yuan Tan of Qingzhou is capable of making decisions but lacks sound judgment. You should travel to Xindu and seek an audience with Yuan Shao.” The Imperial Uncle mounted his horse and headed west toward Xindu, in what is now Jizhou.】

Analysis: Zhao Yun’s earliest epithet was originally “Zhao Zilong of Hengshan,” rather than the familiar “Zhao Zilong of Changshan.”

【Cao Cao exchanged words with Yan Liang. Yan Liang angrily shouted, “Cao Cao, you traitor—do not flee!” He spurred his horse forward with spear in hand and charged straight at Cao Cao. Xiahou Dun rode out to engage him. After fighting for approximately thirty rounds, Xiahou Dun suffered a crushing defeat.】

Analysis: Yan Liang defeated Xiahou Dun in thirty rounds, demonstrating terrifying combat prowess far superior to Zhang Fei’s.

【Lord Guan emerged from the encampment, mounted his horse with blade in hand, and observed Yan Liang’s command canopy from high ground, recognizing it as Yan Liang’s. Seeing one hundred thousand troops surrounding the encampment, Yunchang charged toward it alone on horseback with his blade in hand. Upon spotting Yan Liang inside the encampment, he met with no hesitation or resistance and cut off Yan Liang’s head with a single stroke... Cao Cao said, “Zhang Fei is even stronger!”】

Analysis: Guan Yu killed Yan Liang instantly in less than one round. Moreover, Sanguozhi Pinghua contains absolutely no suggestion of the so-called “sneak attack” found in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

【Without exchanging a word, Lord Guan charged straight at Wen Chou. They fought for fewer than ten rounds before Wen Chou was defeated... Lord Guan pursued Wen Chou, and upon closing in, brought down his blade, cleaving him from the shoulder through the torso and splitting him into two.】

Analysis: Guan Yu defeated Wen Chou in fewer than ten rounds. Wen Chou was clearly stronger than Yan Liang.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Guan Yu > Wen Chou > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei > Lu Bu



VII. Zhao Yun's Position

【Zhao Yun wielded a spear known as the Yajiao Spear. Across the seas and to the ends of the earth, none could rival it. Among the spearmen of the Three Kingdoms, it ranked first after Zhang Fei... Zhang Fei flew into a rage, wielded his eighteen-chi steel spear, and charged at Zhao Yun. Their two horses met, and their spears darted back and forth like great pythons as they fought fiercely for thirty rounds. Zhang Fei angrily exclaimed, “Of all the spearmen I have encountered, this man is truly formidable!” They fought for another thirty rounds, after which Zhao Yun’s strength began to fail, and he turned his horse and retreated to his own formation.】

Analysis: Zhao Yun and Lu Bu were both defeated by Zhang Fei after sixty rounds. Sanguozhi Pinghua also contains the concept of the Five Tiger Generals, with Zhao Yun ranked alongside Zhang Fei. Moreover, the spear was considered superior to the halberd, and Zhao Yun was the foremost spearman after Zhang Fei. Considering that Lu Bu was defeated by Zhang Fei three times, Zhao Yun was slightly stronger than Lu Bu.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Guan Yu > Wen Chou > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

VIII. Kongming and Wei Yan

【Zhuge Liang stood nine chi and two cun tall and was only thirty years old. His beard was as black as a raven, his fingernails were three cun long, and he was as handsome as a fine gentleman.】

Analysis: In Sanguozhi Pinghua, Kongming stands nine chi and two cun tall, making him exceptionally imposing. In Romance of the Three Kingdoms, his height was reduced to eight chi.

【Zhang Fei once again faced Han Guozhong in battle. The Hu warrior rode out again! Zhang Fei engaged him on horseback, and they fought for approximately ten rounds without a decisive outcome. Their fighting continued for three days. Zhang Fei then sent word requesting that the military advisor be brought forward. After receiving the military advisor into the encampment, Zhang Fei said to him, “Were we able to obtain this man, why should we fear that the Han realm could not be restored?”】

Analysis: Han Guozhong fought Zhang Fei for three days without a decisive outcome. Considering that Zhang Fei’s overall battle record was more extensive than Han Guozhong’s, Zhang Fei is therefore judged to be slightly stronger than Han Guozhong.

【The following day, when the two armies faced each other, Wei Yan slew Han Guozhong and sent him falling from his horse.】

Analysis: Wei Yan's ability to slay Han Guozhong—who had fought Zhang Fei to a draw—demonstrates that Wei Yan was positioned at an exceptionally high level of combat prowess.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Guan Yu > Wei Yan > Wen Chou > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei ≈ Han Guozhong > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

IX. The Strongest Warrior in the Entire Book: Huang Zhong

【Pang Tong said, “This man is a native of E Commandery. His surname is Huang, his given name is Zhong, and his courtesy name is Hansheng.” The military advisor ordered Wei Yan to engage him in battle. After fighting for two days, neither gained the upper hand.】

Analysis: Wei Yan and Huang Zhong fought fiercely for two days, with neither gaining the upper hand.

【Pang Tong said, “Have Zhang Fei take the field against him.” Zhang Fei fought Huang Zhong for ten rounds, yet neither gained the upper hand... When Zhang Fei and Huang Zhong met again on horseback, they fought for one hundred rounds without a decisive outcome. Then Wei Yan was sent out once more, and the two warriors joined forces against Huang Zhong. Huang Zhong's martial might only grew fiercer... (Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Wei Yan vs. Huang Zhong) The four horsemen clashed in battle, and suddenly a spray of blood appeared as one warrior fell from his horse. It turned out that Huang Zhong's horse had stumbled, and he began fighting the three warriors on foot with his blade. Lord Guan said, “This is truly a great man—there is none like him in the world!” The military advisor shouted, “All three of you, rein in your horses!”】

Analysis: This battle case is nothing short of astonishing. Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Wei Yan—three top-tier elite warriors—joined forces to surround and attack Huang Zhong. Although Huang Zhong was accidentally unhorsed, he was still able to fight on foot and withstand three fierce mounted opponents. This Sanguozhi Pinghua version of “The Three Heroes Battle Huang Zhong” features an enemy lineup far stronger than the Liu Bei–Guan Yu–Zhang Fei combination before Hulao Pass, and yet Huang Zhong still held his ground under such desperate circumstances until Kongming, utterly shaken, called a halt.

If Huang Zhong's earlier “two-day draw with Wei Yan” could still be regarded as a tentative testing of strength, then this battle—facing three warriors alone and refusing to collapse, unlike Lu Bu at Hulao Pass, who was driven into retreat—completely establishes Huang Zhong as the absolute ceiling of combat prowess in Sanguozhi Pinghua.



【Xiahou Dun rode out and fought Ma Chao. After only a few rounds, Ma Chao feigned defeat, and Xiahou Dun pursued him. Ma Chao turned and shot an arrow at Xiahou Dun, nearly killing him.】

Analysis: Ma Chao defeated Xiahou Dun with an arrow after only a few rounds. His combat-prowess position was therefore below Guan Yu, who had killed Yan Liang instantly.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Huang Zhong > Guan Yu > Ma Chao > Wei Yan > Wen Chou > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei ≈ Han Guozhong > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

X. The Iron-Arm General: Zhao Yun's Defeat

【The military advisor said, “Within the city is a general from Sichuan who calls himself Zhang Yi(Sanguozhi Pinghua), the Iron-Arm General. His charge is irresistible, and he has defeated Zhao Yun.”】

Analysis: Zhang Yi, the Iron-Arm General, defeated Zhao Yun after an unspecified number of rounds.

【The military advisor attempted to persuade Zhang Yi with courteous words, but he refused to submit. He then engaged Zhang Fei on horseback, and they fought for three days without a decisive outcome, exchanging more than a thousand rounds. Even after a full month, Ziwu City still could not be captured.】

Analysis: Zhang Yi fought Zhang Fei for three days and more than a thousand rounds without a decisive outcome.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Huang Zhong > Guan Yu > Ma Chao > Wei Yan > Wen Chou > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei ≈ Zhang Yi ≈ Han Guozhong > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

XI. Huang Zhong Swiftly Slays Zhang Ren

【There was a commander from Sichuan named Zhang Ren. In fewer than three rounds, Huang Zhong slew him and sent him falling from his horse.】

Analysis: Huang Zhong killed Zhang Ren in fewer than three rounds. Considering that Guan Yu killed Yan Liang in less than one round and defeated Wen Chou in fewer than ten rounds, Zhang Ren’s combat-prowess position falls between Wen Chou and Yan Liang.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Huang Zhong > Guan Yu > Ma Chao > Wei Yan > Wen Chou > Zhang Ren > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun > Zhang Fei ≈ Zhang Yi ≈ Han Guozhong > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

XII. The Earliest Establishment of the Five Tiger Generals

【Marquis Wu ordered Wei Yan to ride east and intercept Ma Chao. When the two armies faced each other, Ma Chao feigned defeat and shot Wei Yan with an arrow.】

Analysis: Ma Chao struck Wei Yan with an arrow, but no decisive victory was established.

【Lord Guan was enfeoffed as the Marquis of Shouting; Zhang Fei as the Marquis of Xichang; Ma Chao as the Marquis of Dingyuan; Huang Zhong as the Marquis of Dinglun; and Zhao Yun as the Marquis of Ligu. The Imperial Uncle graciously appointed them the Five Tiger Generals.】

Analysis: This demonstrates that Sanguozhi Pinghua established the concept of the “Five Tiger Generals” earlier than Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

【At dawn the following day, the two armies faced each other... Xiahou Dun was ordered to ride out. Liu Feng engaged him in battle. At nightfall, both sides withdrew their forces to their respective encampments.】

Analysis: Liu Feng and Xiahou Dun fought fiercely throughout the entire day, with neither gaining the upper hand. His ability to fight Xiahou Dun to a draw indicates that Liu Feng was also stronger than Zhang Fei.

【He then led his army down the mountain and engaged Huang Zhong on horseback. In fewer than three rounds, Xiahou Yuan suffered a crushing defeat and fled back up the mountain.】

Analysis: Huang Zhong overwhelmingly defeated Xiahou Yuan in fewer than three rounds.

 **Combat-Prowess Progression:** Huang Zhong > Guan Yu > Ma Chao > Wei Yan > Xiahou Yuan ≈ Wen Chou > Zhang Ren > Yan Liang > Xiahou Dun ≈ Liu Feng > Zhang Fei ≈ Zhang Yi ≈ Han Guozhong > Zhao Yun ≈ Lu Bu

XIII. Guan Suo and Jiang Wei's Crushing Defeats

【Prefect Lü Kai said, “The military advisor has divided his army into five columns and is slaughtering the common people.” He then led thirty thousand troops out to battle, whereupon Guan Suo feigned defeat.】

Analysis: This proves that the character Guan Suo appeared in Sanguozhi Pinghua earlier than in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.



【The common people rushed to inform Sima Yi that Marquis Wu had died. Upon hearing the news, Sima Yi led his army to seize Marquis Wu's body... Jiang Wei flew into a rage, spurred his horse forward with blade in hand, and charged straight at Sima Yi. The two engaged in battle, but after only a few rounds, Jiang Wei was defeated and fled, with Sima Yi pursuing him from behind.】

Analysis: Jiang Wei was actually defeated by Sima Yi after “only a few rounds”! This is a development that readers of Romance of the Three Kingdoms would find almost unimaginable. This battle provides ample proof that the relative strength of fictional warriors depends entirely upon the author's will: **wherever the author's pen leads, even a tiny chick can take down a great tiger.**



Conclusion: Final Combat-Prowess Ranking of Sanguozhi Pinghua

Based on the battle records analyzed above, the book's combat-prowess pyramid is as follows:

【Divine Tier】 : Huang Zhong (fought three opponents alone without defeat)

【Near-Divine Tier】 : Guan Yu, Ma Chao, Wei Yan

【Quasi-Divine Tier】 : Xiahou Yuan, Wen Chou, Zhang Ren, Yan Liang

【First-Rate Tier】 : Xiahou Dun, Liu Feng

【Second-Rate Tier】 : Zhang Fei, Zhang Yi, Han Guozhong

【Third-Rate Tier】 : Zhao Yun, Lu Bu (both were defeated by second-rate warriors)

【Lowest Tier】 : Sima Yi, Jiang Wei



Author's Concluding Remarks

The terrifying description in Sanguozhi Pinghua of Huang Zhong “single-handedly fighting Wei Yan, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei” without suffering defeat makes his status as “the strongest warrior in Sanguozhi Pinghua” entirely deserved. Yet when Luo Guanzhong created Romance of the Three Kingdoms, he stripped Huang Zhong of this astonishing display of combat prowess and allowed him only to fight Guan Yu alone on equal terms. This represented an enormous weakening of the character.

This demonstrates that the boundless imagination of fiction often depends upon an author's subjective preference for particular characters. An author may freely glorify whichever warrior he favors. The author of Sanguozhi Pinghua favored Huang Zhong and elevated him to first place. Then whom did Luo Guanzhong, the author of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, truly intend to glorify as the strongest?

Selecting the Textual Edition of Romance of the Three Kingdoms

I. Findings of Scholarly Research

Numerous editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms have circulated down to the present day. The editors of these various editions often altered key passages or the number of combat rounds written by the original author, Luo Guanzhong, according to their own positions and preferences. As a result, later readers were misled, giving rise to erroneous combat-prowess rankings that departed from Luo Guanzhong's original intent.

For convenience, this book will use the following abbreviated names: Luo Guanzhong's original version will be referred to as the "Luo Edition"; the edition published by Ye Fengchun as the "Ye Edition"; the edition published by Yu Xiangdou as the "Yu Edition"; and the edition published in the first year of the Jiajing reign as the "Jiajing Edition."

(Note: Because much of the surviving content of the Ye Edition is incomplete, the author will use the closely related Yu Edition as a supplementary source.)

To reconstruct the most authentic combat-prowess ranking, the first priority should be to use the Luo Edition—the earliest version of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, personally written by Luo Guanzhong—because it would most faithfully preserve the author's original intent. Unfortunately, the true Luo Edition has long since been lost.

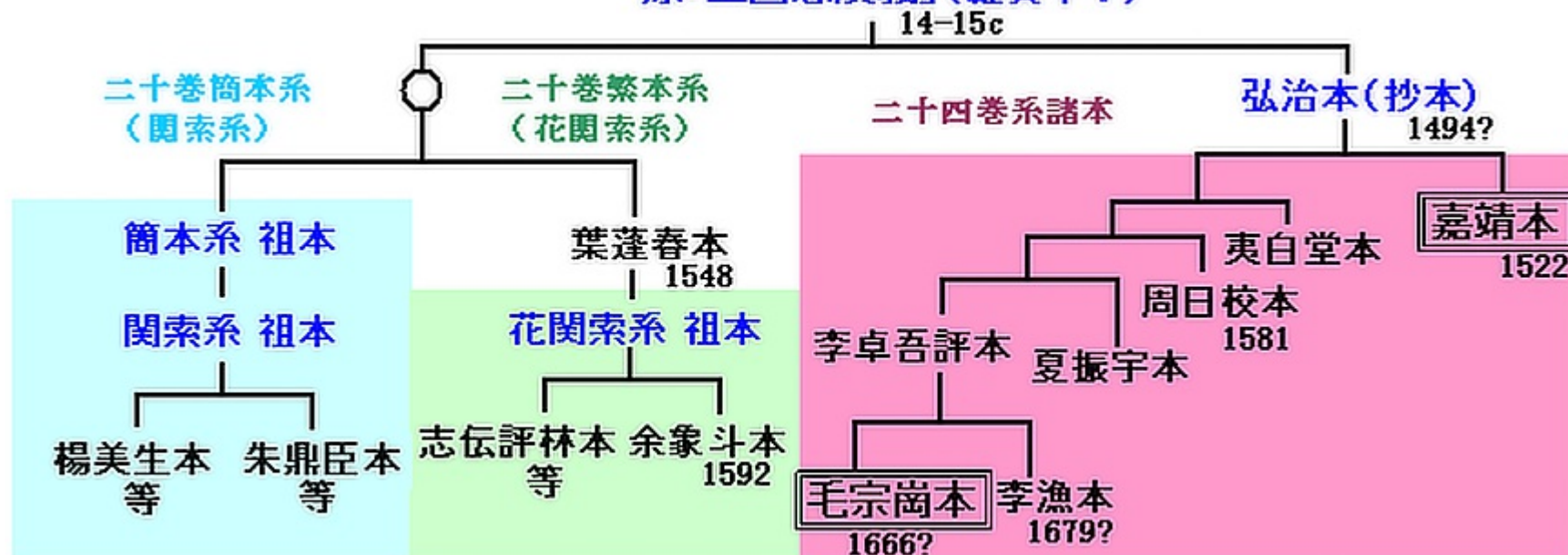
The author can therefore only adopt the next-best approach: identifying the surviving edition whose textual lineage is closest to the Luo Edition and using it as the primary basis. Scholars generally agree that the Jiajing Edition and the Ye Edition are the two surviving versions closest to the original work—but which of the two is superior?

In terms of publication date, the Jiajing Edition was printed in 1522 and is the earliest surviving edition. Chronologically, it is indeed closer to the Luo Edition. However, an analysis of the textual content shows that the Ye Edition preserves an earlier form more closely resembling the Luo Edition.

For the author, **publication date is not the sole criterion. The decisive question is whether the content faithfully preserves the original form of the Luo Edition.**



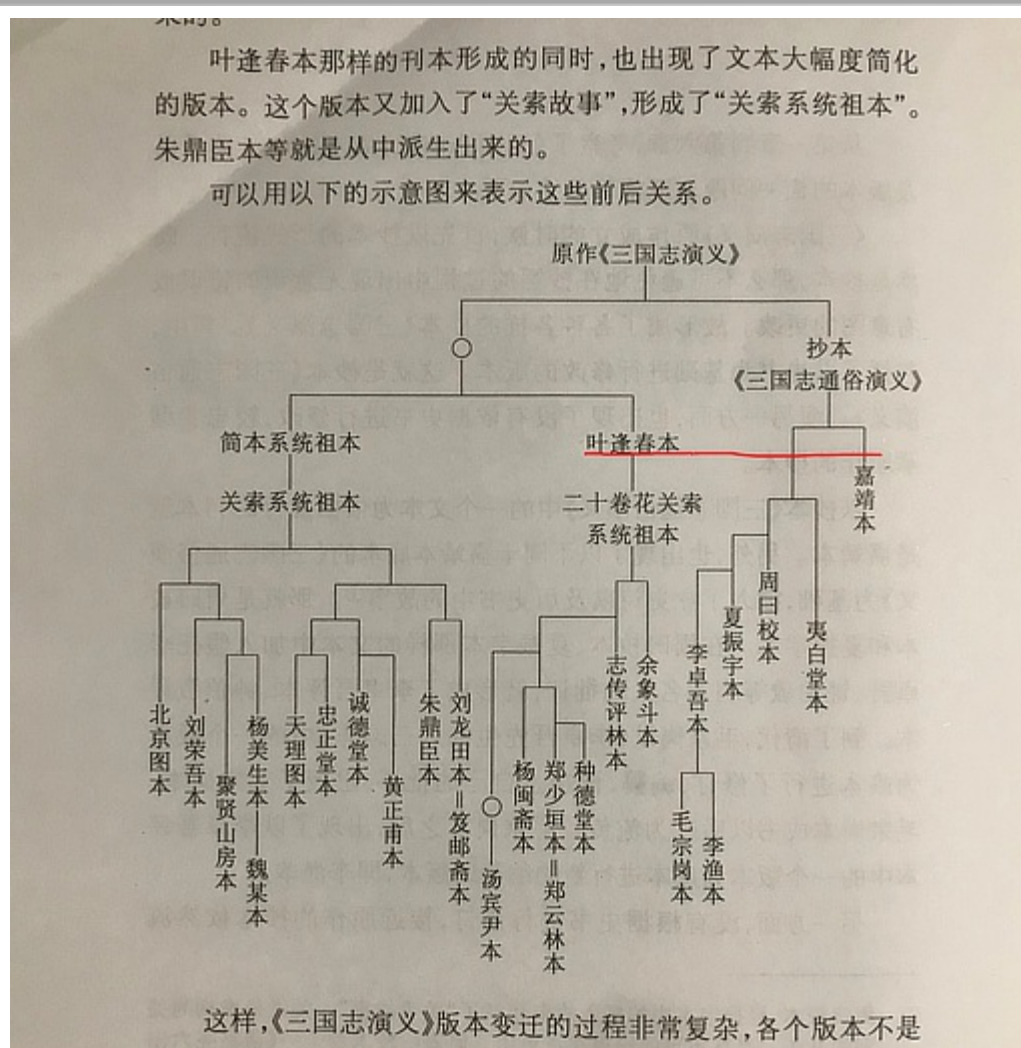
原「三国志演義」(羅貫中?)



※ 青字は現存する版本が発見されておらず、存在が想定されている版である。

Source: “System Diagram of the Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms” / Drawn by Satoshi Nakagawa, a Japanese scholar

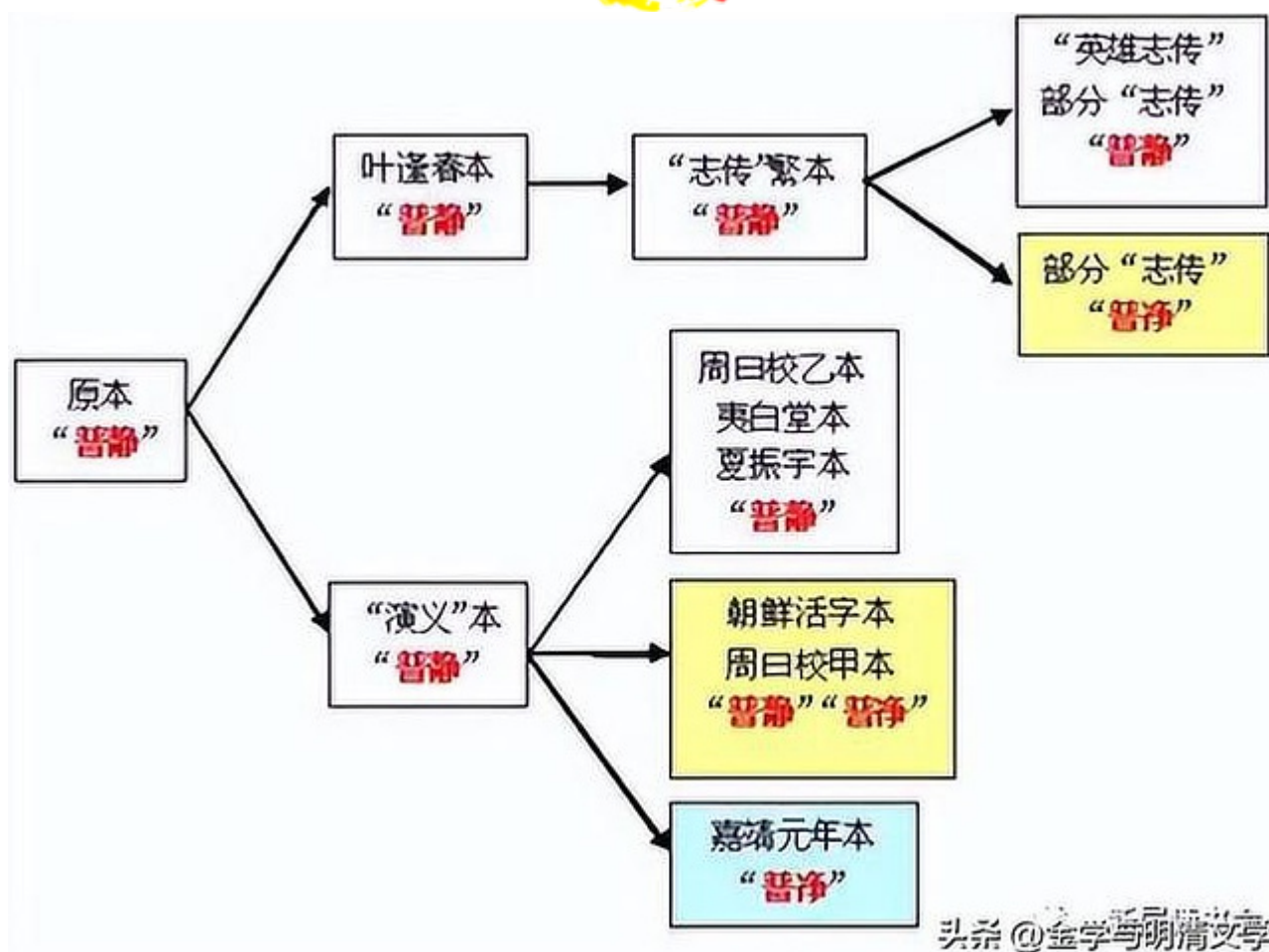
※ Note: The editions marked in blue in the diagram are either no longer extant or are believed to have once existed, but no surviving physical copies have yet been discovered.



这样,《三国志演義》版本变迁的过程非常复杂,各个版本不是

Source: A Study of the Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms / Written by Satoshi Nakagawa

Explanation: Unlike the diagram above, which arranges the editions according to their “dates of publication,” this diagram analyzes the textual lineages through which the contents of the various editions evolved. As the diagram clearly shows, within the transmission of the edition system, the Ye Edition occupies an earlier position than the Jiajing Edition. This indicates that its textual lineage is closer to the original Luo Edition.



Source: “The ‘Pujing’ Question in the Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms” / Drawn by Zhou Wenye, Professor at Capital Normal University

Amid the vast body of research on the editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, how can we determine which version comes closest to Luo Guanzhong’s original intent? Scholar Zhou Wenye proposed an exceptionally important “textual genetic marker”: when Guan Yu passed through the Five Gates, was the Dharma name of the eminent monk at Zhenguo Temple written as “Pujing” (普靜) or “Pujing” (普淨)? As shown in the diagram above, rigorous textual comparison reveals a clear path of evolution.

【1】The Original Setting of the Luo Edition

In the “original edition” of Romance of the Three Kingdoms created by Luo Guanzhong—the version shown at the far left of the diagram—the monk’s Dharma name was written as “Pujing” (普靜). This represents the author’s original setting.

【2】The Divergence into Two Major Textual Lineages

Over time, differences emerged as the book was copied and printed.

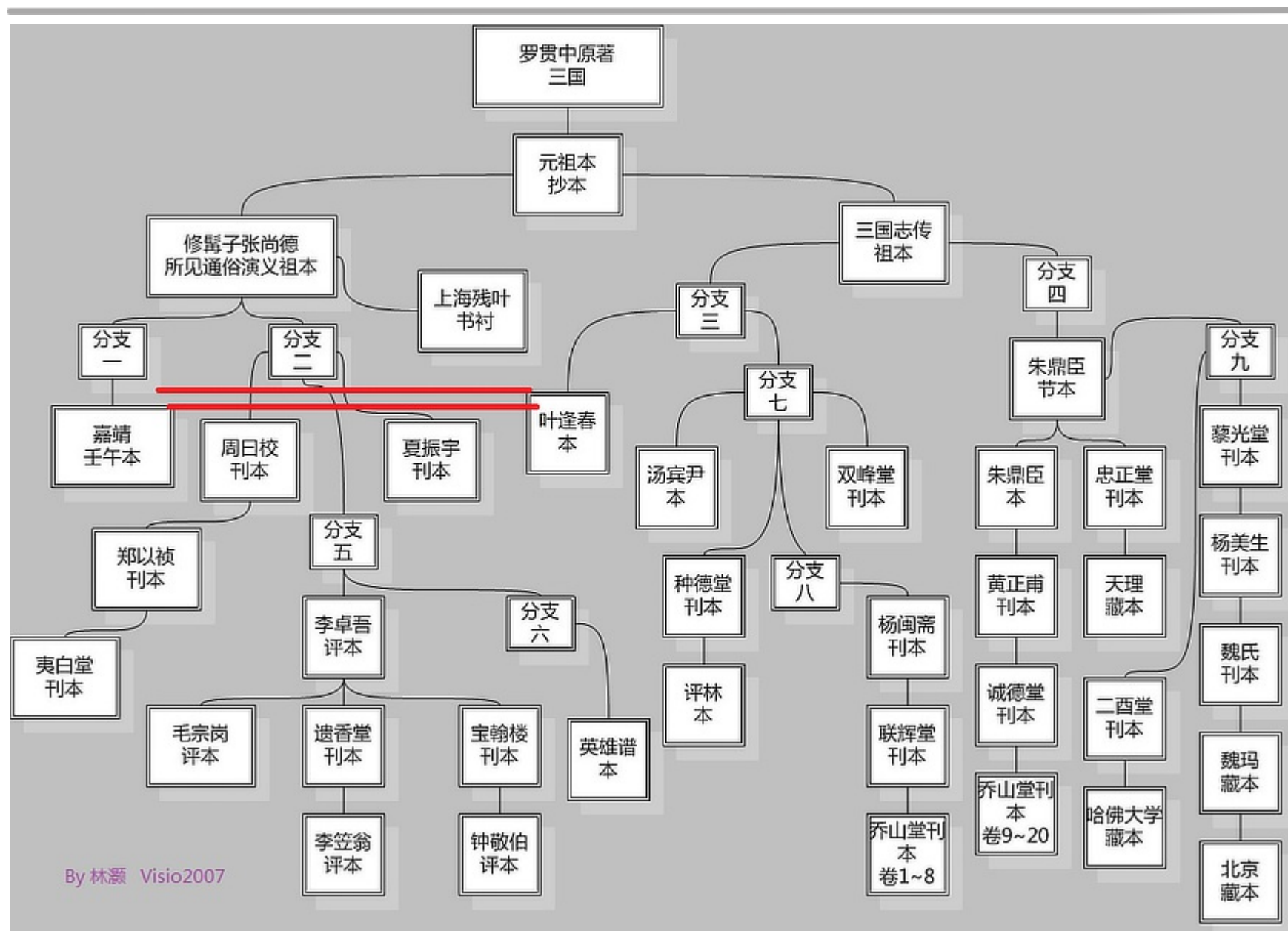
●→ **Ye Edition Lineage (upper branch):** Although the Ye Edition was printed somewhat later, it faithfully inherited the wording of the Luo Edition and continued to write the name as “Pujing” (普靜). This demonstrates that it belongs to a direct textual lineage that had not undergone extensive alteration.

●→ **Jiajing Edition Lineage (lower branch):** At this point, however, the Jiajing Edition underwent a textual mutation, changing the Dharma name to “Pujing” (普淨). This indicates that the Jiajing Edition had already been polished or revised by later literati and had departed from Luo Guanzhong’s original wording.

[3] Conclusion: Why Does This Book Adopt the Ye Edition?

This “diagram of edition evolution” provides irrefutable evidence that an earlier publication date does not necessarily mean that the text is closer to the Luo Edition.

Although the Jiajing Edition was published earlier, it no longer preserves the original form, having changed the character 靜 to 淨. Although the Ye Edition was published later, it retained Luo Guanzhong’s original wording by preserving the character 靜. Therefore, in pursuit of the highest possible accuracy in the combat-prowess rankings, this book rejects the revised Jiajing Edition and firmly adopts the Ye Edition, whose textual lineage is purer, as its primary basis.



Source: “Chronological Diagram of the Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms” / Drawn by Lin Hao

According to the “Chronological Diagram of the Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms” drawn by expert Lin Hao, we can clearly identify one crucial fact: the Jiajing Edition and the Ye Edition do not stand in a parent-child line of transmission. Rather, they are two separate branches derived from the same ancestral text.

[1] Differences Between the Branch Lineages

As shown in the diagram, Luo Guanzhong’s original Luo Edition was transmitted through handwritten copies and gradually developed into several distinct textual lineages. Although the Jiajing Edition was the earliest to be printed, it belongs to

a branch that underwent extensive polishing and rewriting by later literati—Branch One. The Ye Edition, despite being printed somewhat later, belongs to another lineage that retained a plainer textual form and suffered less alteration by later literati—Branch Three.

【2】 The Key Evidence

As Professor Zhou Wenye explained on the preceding page, in Luo Guanzhong's original work, the monk encountered by Guan Yu while passing through the Five Gates was named "Pujing" (普靜).

The Ye Edition, together with the Zhizhuan textual lineage, fully preserved the original characters 普靜.

The Jiajing Edition, by contrast, changed the name to "Pujing" (普淨).

Although this difference may appear minor, it provides decisive evidence of the editions' textual lineage. It proves that, in terms of textual inheritance, the Ye Edition preserved Luo Guanzhong's original setting more faithfully than the Jiajing Edition.

【3】 Conclusion

An earlier publication date does not necessarily indicate that an edition preserves a more original form of the text. This diagram clearly reveals the relative positions of the two editions within the evolutionary tree, as indicated by the two red lines, and thus provides firm scholarly support for the author's choice of edition.

版本	楊修辯駁	曹操反應	小字夾注
葉逢春刊本	修曰：「丞相秘藏之書，雖已刊板，未曾傳播於世。（下略）」	曹曰：「莫非古人與吾暗合否！」遂命破板燒之。	至今此書（《孟德新書》）不傳於世。
余象斗刊本	修曰：「丞相秘藏之書，雖已刊板，未曾傳播於世。（下略）」	操曰：「莫非古人與吾暗合否！」遂命破板燒之。	至今此書不傳於世。
嘉元序刊本	修曰：「丞相秘藏之書，雖已成帙，未傳於世。（下略）」	操曰：「莫非古人與吾暗合歟！」遂令扯碎其書，燒之。	柴世宗時方刊板。舊本「書」作「板」，差矣。今《孫武子》止有魏武帝註。
夏振宇刊本	修曰：「丞相秘藏之書，雖已成帙，未傳於世。（下略）」	操曰：「莫非古人與吾暗合否！」遂令扯碎其書，燒之。	「考證」《孟德新書》不可考，今《孫子兵法》有魏武帝註，疑即此書。至柴世宗時方有刊板。舊本《三國志》。

由此而見，在嘉靖、萬曆間，《三國志演義》已存在着「舊本」與非舊本。這裏區別的關鍵在於《孟德新書》是不是板刻的印刷品。正如嘉元序刊本的小字註所指出：「舊本『書』作『板』」。（夏振宇刊本與周曰校刊本這裏的「考證」文字漏脫此句，但其意思與嘉元序刊本完全相同^{（八）}。）按今姑勿論「刊板」的起源，但是從歷史上看，曹操那個時代還沒有產生雕板印刷術則是肯定的。所以，非舊本將有關文字修改作「雖已成佚」、「遂令扯碎其書燒之」，而「舊本」或以「舊本」為母本、祖本的後刻本仍然保存原來的「雖已刊板」、「遂命破板燒

The Ye Fengchun Edition of Sanguozhi Shizhuan Preserved in Spain, Volume I

【He then ordered that the written document be torn to pieces and burned. Printing blocks were not introduced until the reign of Chai Shizong. In the old edition, the word 書 (“writing”) was written as 板 (“printing block”); this is incorrect.】 —Jiajing Edition

A common misconception holds that the Jiajing Edition, being the earliest surviving edition, must therefore be Luo Guanzhong’s own original Luo Edition. However, this claim collapses under the evidence provided by a small-character interlinear annotation in the Jiajing Edition chapter “Zhang Yongnian Challenges Yang Xiu.” The subtle textual variation between the characters 板 and 書 reveals that the Jiajing Edition itself openly acknowledges the existence of an even older edition.

【1】 The Jiajing Edition Is Not the Original Work

This annotation clearly demonstrates that the reviser of the Jiajing Edition had consulted an “old edition,” which was very likely the Luo Edition or an ancestral text closely related to it. The reviser believed that the use of the character 板 in the old edition was incorrect—“this is erroneous”—and therefore changed it to 書 according to his own judgment. This proves that the Jiajing Edition is a subjectively revised text rather than the original form of the work.

【2】 The Ye Edition Preserves the Original Form Instead

By contrast, the later-printed Ye Edition and Yu Edition continued to use the character 板 in the same passage—the very character that the reviser of the Jiajing Edition regarded as incorrect.

【3】 Conclusion on the Editions

This demonstrates that although the Ye Edition and Yu Edition were published later, they mechanically copied their ancestral text without making arbitrary alterations and therefore preserved the original textual markers of the Luo Edition more completely. By comparison, the Jiajing Edition, whose reviser presumptuously altered the wording, is clearly less faithful to the original text than the Ye Edition and Yu Edition.

三國志演義古版匯集編輯委員會

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顧問

柳存仁 澳大利亞國立大學

孫權賞賚甘寧百騎的酒肉——小說寫甘寧百騎劫曹營前，孫權賞酒肉以壯行。葉逢春刊本說，孫權賜「酒百瓶、肉百斤，賞犒戰士」(6/54b)。而人文影本作「賞酒五十瓶、羊肉五十斤，賞賜軍士」。所賞酒、肉，俱半其數。

關東災年的谷價——小說寫興平元年漢陽大戰，時值蝗災歲荒。葉逢春刊本說：「關東一境，每谷一石直錢五十萬」(1/86b)。而人文影本作「關東一境，每谷一斛直錢五十貫」。按一石為十斗，古代一斛亦為十斗(南宋末改為五斗)，兩者容量相等。千錢為一貫，「五十貫」即五萬錢。兩本所寫谷價，相差十倍。考《三國志》魏書《武帝紀》載：「是歲谷一斛五十餘萬錢」，葉逢春刊本與之相近。

從以上例舉中，我們也可以看到葉逢春刊本的複雜性。這個刊本經過了不少的刪削和修改，已非《三國志演義》的初始面目，但又保存傳鈔階段舊本的若干細節和文字，所以比之嘉元序刊本則較為接近於羅貫中的原書。

葉逢春刊本的雕板刻字，存在不少錯誤。至於此西班牙藏本除缺佚第三、第十兩整卷外，在書葉裝訂上也

九

之」。

在所見諸明刻本中，除上表列出外，保存這些「舊本」文字的還有湯賓尹校本、熊清波刊本、劉龍田刊本、朱鼎臣輯本、黃正甫刊本等；而已加修改過的非舊本，則還有周曰校刊本、李卓吾評本、鍾伯敬評本等。

上表所見的非舊本註文，都是針對「舊本」而言的。非舊本的這裏註文，包含有兩重意思。其一是指出「舊本」正文「刊板」的錯誤，說明與非舊本的異同(已見上文敘說)。其二是關於《孟德新書》的流傳問題。「舊本」小字註云：「至今此書不傳於世」。(湯賓尹校本因正文「破板燒之」，而小字註云：「致令此書不傳於世」，稍異。)而非舊本小字註則對之，却認為此書未必「不傳」。嘉元序刊本說：「今《孫武子》止有魏武帝註」，夏振宇刊本與周曰校刊本說：「今《孫子兵法》有魏武帝註，疑即此書」。按非舊本小字註當自有據。今見《隋書》經籍志三著錄：「《孫子兵法》二卷，吳將孫武撰，魏武帝註」，《孫子兵法》一卷，魏武、王淩集解」。又，《宋史》藝文志六兵書類著錄：「魏武帝註《孫子》三卷」。這些著錄當為非舊本小字註所參考。

從這些小字註中，我們也可以不難地看到某些版別文字生成的先後。在這裏，葉逢春刊本、余象斗刊本等不僅正文保留「舊本」文字，而且其小字註文也比嘉元序刊本早。嘉元序刊本是通常被稱為最早的刻本，今見所藏如果不是經過遞修後印的話，這裏的正文與小字註却為什麼反出於晚刻數十年的葉逢春刊本、余象斗刊本之後呢？這是因為在傳抄與刻印過程中，嘉元序刊本經過了很大的修改和過度的整理，而余象斗刊本等雖也有所整理，但是較多的保留「舊本」、「古本」的原有文字。

再次，說「新舊本」。夏振宇刊本卷十一《姜維洮西敗魏兵》寫蜀大將姜維伐魏而背洮水布陣，魏雍州刺史王經引「十員牙將」出，乃回顧諸將說：「姜維驍勇，汝四將可戰之也。彼若退動，便可追擊。」於是，「四將左右而出，來戰姜維」。在王經所下達的口頭命令中，當說到「汝四將可戰之」時，下有註釋：

Source for All Three Images: The Ye Fengchun Edition of Sanguozhi Shizhuan Preserved in Spain, Volume I

When deciding which edition to adopt as the basis for evaluating combat prowess, the author did not work in isolation, but strictly followed the collective findings of Three Kingdoms scholarship. After conducting a detailed comparison of the surviving early editions, the Editorial Committee for the Collected Early Editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms—composed of scholars from China, Japan, Europe, the United States, and other regions—reached the following conclusions:

【1】 The Jiajing Edition’ s “Excessive Cosmetic Revision”

The Jiajing Edition, long regarded by the general public as the standard version, is in fact viewed by specialists as a heavily polished “cosmetically altered edition.” Scholars have pointed out:

“The edition bearing the preface dated to the first year of the Jiajing reign underwent extensive revision and excessive editorial reworking. Although editions such as the Yu Xiangdou Edition were also edited to some extent, they preserved far more of the original wording found in the ‘old editions’ and ‘early editions.’” (See the lower-left image on the preceding page.)

This means that in its pursuit of elegant language and political correctness, the Jiajing Edition sacrificed the original character of Luo Guanzhong’s work.

【2】 The Ye Edition Preserves the Original Textual Markers of the Manuscript Tradition

By contrast, although the Ye Edition contains typographical errors and missing pages because of its relatively poor printing quality, its “textual lineage” is the purest. Scholars have explicitly concluded:

“The Ye Fengchun Edition... preserves a number of details and expressions from old editions dating back to the manuscript-transmission stage. Therefore, compared with the edition bearing the preface dated to the first year of the Jiajing reign, it is closer to Luo Guanzhong’s original work.” (See the lower-right image on the preceding page.)

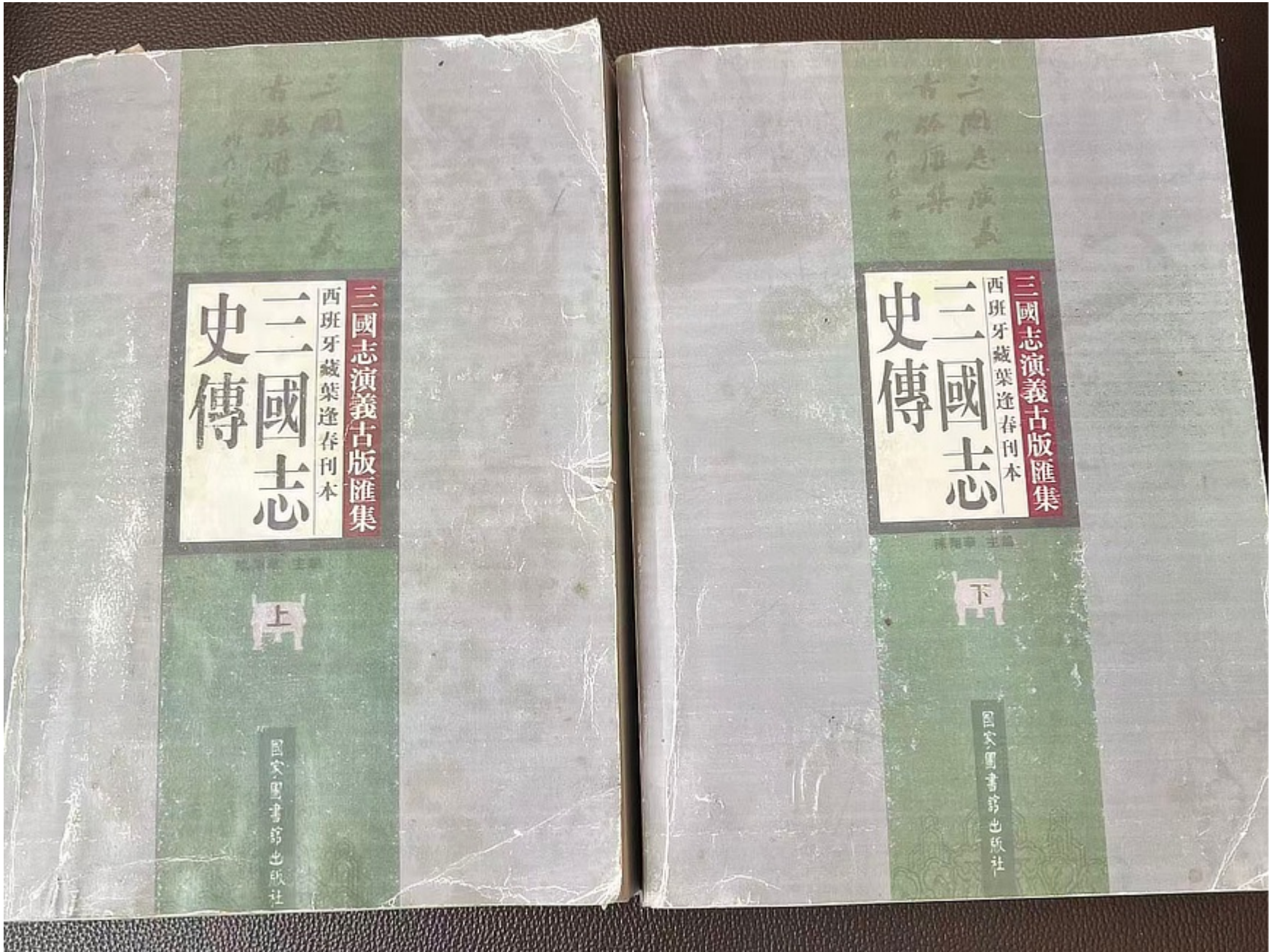
【3】 The Authoritative Scholarly Conclusion

The academic criteria are exceptionally clear:

●→ Jiajing Edition = carefully polished but extensively altered, and therefore farther from Luo Guanzhong’ s original intent.

●→ Ye Fengchun Edition = textually rough but preserves the original form, and therefore closest to Luo Guanzhong’ s original intent.

Based on the conclusions reached by these internationally authoritative scholars, this book firmly adopts the Ye Edition—which is closer to Luo Guanzhong's original work—as the basis for its combat-prowess assessments. The purpose is to strip away the key terms affecting combat prowess that were altered by later literati.



Shown above is the author's personal copy of The Ye Fengchun Edition of Sanguozhi Shizhuan Preserved in Spain, which is divided into Volume I and Volume II.

10 通俗演义三国志史传文史对照本

对关羽的完全不敬，逐步过渡到彻底消除各种对关羽的不敬。对此的修改也是从少量的修改，过渡到修改逐步增加，最后到嘉靖元年本做了彻底修改。

以上通过对《三国演义》书名和“关羽之死”情节的分析，可以看出各种《三国演义》版本的演化过程，这个过程和从其他方面分析的版本演化基本一致。叶逢春本应该是最接近原本的《三国演义》版本。

周文业

2023年3月于北京

Source: A Literary–Historical Comparative Edition of Tongsu Yanyi Sanguozhi Shizhuan / Written by Zhou Wenye

Within the labyrinth of editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which version most faithfully preserves Luo Guanzhong's authentic original text? Opinions have long differed. However, Professor Zhou Wenye of Capital Normal University, a leading Chinese authority on textual bibliography, reached a forceful conclusion in his scholarly work.

【1】 The Evolution of Editions Under the “Deification Movement”

Through a detailed analysis of a crucial episode—“The Death of Guan Yu”—Professor Zhou Wenye identified a clear pattern of textual evolution:

●→ **Early editions, such as the Ye Edition, which is close to the Luo Edition:** These versions portray Guan Yu in a more realistic manner and even contain many episodes that later generations would regard as “completely disrespectful” toward him.

●→ **Transitional editions:** These gradually began removing passages considered disrespectful toward Guan Yu and introduced a limited number of revisions.

●→ **Later editions, such as the Jiajing Edition:** By the first year of the Jiajing reign, in order to conform to the growing social veneration of Guan Yu, revisers had “thoroughly altered” the original work.

【2】 Stripping Away the Disguise to Reveal the Original Form

It is precisely through this evolution from “disrespect” to “idealization” that the chronological order of the editions can be reconstructed. The editions that retain the supposedly “disrespectful” passages are, in fact, the authentic texts that had not yet been embellished or whitewashed by later generations.

Professor Zhou Wenye therefore presented the following crucial conclusion in his book:

“Through the above analysis of the title of Romance of the Three Kingdoms and the episode of ‘The Death of Guan Yu,’ we can observe the evolutionary process of the various editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This process is fundamentally consistent with the evolution of the editions identified through analyses from other perspectives. The Ye Fengchun Edition should be the edition of Romance of the Three Kingdoms closest to the original text.”

【3】 The Solid Foundation of This Book’ s Combat-Prowess Rankings

Since scholars have established that the Ye Edition is the surviving edition closest to Luo Guanzhong’s original text, this book’s decision to use the Ye Edition as the foundation of its combat-prowess analysis is no longer an unconventional personal choice, but an inevitable decision grounded in scholarly findings.

The author refuses to judge the relative strength of the warriors through editions that were later “sanitized” or “altered.” Only by returning to the Ye Edition—the version closest to the Luo Edition—can we reconstruct the most original and untamed world of Three Kingdoms combat prowess envisioned by Luo Guanzhong.

II. Literati vs. Merchants

【1】 Who Revised the Jiajing Edition?—The Intervention of the Literatus Jiang Daqi

Since the Jiajing Edition underwent extensive revision and polishing, who exactly was responsible for this “invisible hand”? According to the preface at the beginning of the Jiajing Edition, it was signed by “Yongyuzi” (庸愚子). Scholarly research has identified this person as Jiang Daqi, a literatus active during the Hongzhi and Zhengde reigns of the Ming dynasty.

As a traditional Confucian literatus, Jiang Daqi approached the editing of Romance of the Three Kingdoms with a strong didactic purpose. To conform to the prevailing moral standards of “honoring Liu Bei and denigrating Cao Cao” and “exalting loyalty and righteousness,” he extensively deleted, altered, and refined passages in Luo Guanzhong’s original text that were considered vulgar, untamed, or disrespectful toward Guan Yu.

For this reason, although Jiang Daqi enhanced the novel’s literary value, he also unintentionally damaged the most original combat-prowess settings created by Luo Guanzhong. This is the principal reason why this book insists on bypassing the Jiajing Edition and returning to the more unembellished Ye Edition.

【2】 Ye Fengchun—A Faithful Transmitter

Unlike the Jiajing Edition, which was revised under the direction of the literatus Jiang Daqi, the publisher of the Ye Edition, Ye Fengchun, was a bookseller from Jianyang, Fujian. The difference between these two identities ultimately determined the fate of their respective editions.

As a literatus, Jiang Daqi had strong motives to “refine” the language and impose moral scrutiny, leading him to make sweeping alterations to the original work.

By contrast, Ye Fengchun, as a commercial bookseller, printed books primarily for profit. To satisfy the public's demand for the story in its existing form—and because textual scholarship was not his profession—he was more inclined simply to reproduce the old edition then in circulation. This commercial practice of “leaving the text alone” and “not making arbitrary changes” unintentionally became the best protection for Luo Guanzhong's original work, preserving in full those descriptions of combat prowess that had not yet been filtered by later literati.

【3】 Conclusion

The literati-produced Jiajing Edition rewrote the original work in pursuit of literary refinement; the merchant-produced Ye Edition preserved the truth in pursuit of profit.

III. The Mystery of Hulao Pass: The Disappearing “Fifty Rounds”

The battle of the Three Heroes against Lu Bu at Hulao Pass is one of the most celebrated episodes in the entire book. However, the details of Zhang Fei and Lu Bu's first encounter differ significantly among the various editions. By comparing the Jiajing Edition with the Ye Edition and examining the internal logic of the work as a whole, the author will investigate which version truly reflects Luo Guanzhong's original intent.

【1】 The Omission in the Key Text

First, let us compare the central passages describing Zhang Fei's battle with Lu Bu in the two editions.

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** [Zhang Fei summoned all his divine might and fought Lu Bu fiercely. The lords of the eight armies saw Zhang Fei's spear technique gradually becoming disordered, while Lu Bu fought with ever greater vigor. Zhang Fei's fighting spirit surged, and he let out a thunderous shout. Guan Yunchang spurred his horse forward and brandished his eighty-two-jin Green Dragon Crescent Blade, joining the attack against Lu Bu. The three horses fought in a T-shaped formation... After a fierce battle, victory and defeat remained undecided.]

●→ **Ye Edition:** [Zhang Fei summoned all his divine might and fought Lu Bu fiercely, while the lords of the eight armies shouted encouragement in unison. Guan Yunchang saw Zhang Fei's spear technique gradually becoming disordered, while Lu Bu fought with ever greater vigor. Zhang Fei's fighting spirit surged, and he let out a thunderous shout. Seeing that Zhang Fei had held Lu Bu in battle, the lords of the eight armies secured their formations and watched on horseback beneath the command flags. The two warriors fought for fifty rounds without either gaining the upper hand. Yunchang spurred his horse forward and brandished his eighty-two-jin Green Dragon Blade, joining the battle against Lu Bu. The three horses fought in a T-shaped formation... After a fierce battle, neither victory nor defeat was decided.]



●→ **The difference is immediately apparent.** The Ye Edition explicitly records that the two warriors “fought for fifty rounds without either gaining the upper hand,” whereas the Jiajing Edition omits this crucial sentence entirely. Did the Ye Edition add an unnecessary detail, or did the Jiajing Edition deliberately delete and alter the original text? We need only examine the other evidence found throughout the book to determine which version is authentic.

【2】 Three Pieces of Ironclad Evidence for Luo Guanzhong’ s Original Intent

Had Luo Guanzhong originally intended Zhang Fei to be inferior to Lu Bu—as the Hulao Pass passage in the Jiajing Edition suggests—then the subsequent laudatory verse and narrative should have followed the same logic. Yet three other descriptions in the book directly contradict the Jiajing Edition’s unauthorized alteration.

●→ **The Position Established by the Laudatory Verse:** In both editions, the verse praising the Battle of Hulao Pass presents the two warriors as evenly matched.

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【After a fierce battle, victory and defeat remained undecided.】

●→ **Ye Edition:** 【After a fierce battle, neither victory nor defeat was decided.】

◎→ **The conclusion of the verse in both editions is a “draw.”** However, the Jiajing Edition removes the process in which the two warriors fought evenly for fifty rounds, yet retains the concluding verse stating that neither side had won. This creates a logical contradiction between the process—Zhang Fei’s spear technique becoming disordered—and the conclusion—neither victory nor defeat being decided.

By contrast, in the Ye Edition, the main text’s “fifty-round draw” corresponds perfectly with the conclusion of the laudatory verse.

●→ **Lu Bu’ s Wariness:** In the later episode concerning the loss of Xuzhou, Zhang Fei was drunk and unable to fight at full strength, yet Lu Bu still did not dare pursue him.

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【Lu Bu had always known Zhang Fei’s courage and likewise did not dare press him.】

●→ **Ye Edition:** 【Lu Bu knew Zhang Fei’s courage and likewise did not dare pursue him.】

◎→ **According to the logic of the Hulao Pass passage in the Jiajing Edition,** Lu Bu was capable of throwing Zhang Fei’s spear technique into disorder. Why, then, would he not dare pursue Zhang Fei when the latter was drunk? This is plainly illogical. Only the logic of the Ye Edition makes sense: Lu Bu knew full well that

Zhang Fei possessed the strength to fight him to a draw over fifty rounds, and this explains why he was so wary of Zhang Fei's courage.

●→ **The Confidence Behind “Three Hundred Rounds”** : The book twice includes dialogue in which Zhang Fei challenges Lu Bu to fight for three hundred rounds. Both the Jiajing Edition and the Ye Edition contain these passages; the quotations below follow the wording of the Ye Edition.

☉→ **First “Three Hundred Rounds” Challenge**: 【You are another man's slave—how dare you call my elder brother your brother? Come, fight me for three hundred rounds!】

☉→ **Second “Three Hundred Rounds” Challenge**: 【Zhang Fei leaped forward on horseback, leveled his spear, and shouted, “Lu Bu, come fight me for three hundred rounds!”】

☉→ **These two challenges to fight for “three hundred rounds” imply that**, in the author's conception, the two warriors belonged to the same general level of combat prowess. This once again confirms the plausibility of the “fifty-round draw” at Hulao Pass.

[3] Conclusion: An Artificial Break in Narrative Logic

In summary, Luo Guanzhong was one of the great literary masters of his age. It is inconceivable that, in the opening battle that established the martial tone of the entire book—the Battle of Hulao Pass—he would have committed such a crude inconsistency. An author would naturally have revised and polished an opening episode of such importance with exceptional care. Therefore, absurdities such as the contradiction between the main text and the laudatory verse, together with repeated conflicts in the later narrative logic, cannot have reflected Luo Guanzhong's original intent. They must instead have resulted from arbitrary alterations made by later revisers.

The only logical conclusion is that Jiang Daqi, the reviser of the Jiajing Edition, was in fact a blindly devoted “**Lu Bu fanboy**.”

In order to deliberately elevate the upper limit of Lu Bu's combat prowess, Jiang Daqi removed the crucial words, “They fought for fifty rounds without either gaining the upper hand,” thereby attempting to create the false impression that Lu Bu was invincible under heaven. Yet although Jiang altered the main text, his own limited literary ability prevented him from comprehensively and consistently rewriting the connected laudatory verse, the subsequent course of the battles, and the characters' later dialogue—the three pieces of ironclad evidence discussed above. As a result, he left behind logical flaws in the text that are impossible to conceal.

This book therefore delivers its final verdict: only the “fifty-round draw” preserved in the Ye Edition represents the most authentic version of Luo Guanzhong’s Battle of Hulao Pass—and the version that aligns perfectly with the logic of the combat data.



【Core Visual Logic: A Drunken Tiger Is Not to Be Trifled With—Lu Bu’s Wariness】

By Lu Bu’s refusal to press a drunken Zhang Fei, we can work backward to infer the result of the Battle of Hulao Pass. If Lu Bu had won at Hulao Pass earlier, he would have had no reason to fear Zhang Fei later at Xuzhou; since Lu Bu did fear him at Xuzhou, it follows that he did not win at Hulao Pass.

IV. “Exalting Guan Yu” and “Denigrating Guan Yu”: Which Edition Inherited Luo Guanzhong’s Original Intent?

In textual scholarship, beyond examining wording and textual variants, we must also investigate the author’s central creative intent. As is well known, Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a novel with a strongly pro-Liu Bei orientation, while Luo Guanzhong elevated Guan Yu to an almost divine status.

Since Luo Guanzhong’s own creative purpose was to “exalt Guan Yu”—that is, to raise Guan Yu’s stature as much as possible—we need only examine the various editions: whichever edition makes the greatest effort to strengthen Guan Yu’s portrayal is the one closest to Luo Guanzhong’s original intent.

【1】 Luo Guanzhong’s Creative Spectrum of “Exalting Guan Yu”

First, we must clarify a central question: just how far did Luo Guanzhong’s “favoritism” toward Guan Yu extend? Throughout Romance of the Three Kingdoms, in order to create an invincible image of Guan Yu attaining apotheosis through martial achievement, the author even went so far as to substantially alter

and overturn the official historical record.

●→ **Transferring Military Achievements:** According to the official histories, Hua Xiong was actually slain by Sun Jian, while Wen Chou died amid the chaos of battle. Yet with a stroke of his brush, Luo Guanzhong attributed all of these illustrious achievements to Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade.

●→ **Inventing Divine-Tier Exploits:** The world-famous episodes "Passing Five Gates and Slaying Six Generals" and "Righteously Releasing Cao Cao at Huarong Trail" are entirely absent from the official historical record. These magnificent episodes were scripts created exclusively by Luo Guanzhong to highlight Guan Yu's loyalty, righteousness, divine courage, and martial might.

●→ **Absolute Superiority in the Combat Data:** The book deliberately has Guan Yu instantly kill the fierce warrior Hua Xiong in only "one round." By comparison, Lu Bu was unable to kill Gongsun Zan—who was weaker than Hua Xiong—within two rounds. Guan Yu was also given a battle record of "defeating Lu Bu three times" (see Battle Cases 32, 152, and 155), the second-highest total number of generals slain in the entire book, and an exceptionally large number of laudatory verses praising him.

●→ **Establishing an Ironclad Verdict Through the Official History:** Luo Guanzhong deliberately quoted Zhuge Liang's famous statement from Records of the Three Kingdoms: [Mengqi (Ma Chao)... still cannot compare with the unparalleled and extraordinary Lord of the Magnificent Beard (Guan Yu).]

Had the author disagreed with this historical statement, he could simply have omitted it, or even altered it through the same method of transferring achievements so that "Ma Chao and Zhang Fei were superior to Guan Yu." Instead, he reproduced the original wording, clearly intending to use the authority of the official history to establish ironclad evidence for the combat-prowess positioning of "Guan Yu > Ma Chao and Zhang Fei."

●→ **Taken together, the evidence leaves no room for doubt:** Luo Guanzhong was an intensely devoted "Guan Yu fanboy." Within the combat-prowess system he constructed for Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Guan Yu's true combat-prowess setting should therefore be that of a peak-level warrior standing above Lu Bu.

[2] Testing the Combat-Prowess Spectrum Across Editions

Having established the author's intent, we can now compare how the Jiajing Edition and the Ye Edition—including the closely related Yu Edition—portray Guan Yu's combat prowess. Which edition strengthens Guan Yu, and which weakens him?

●→ **The Efficiency of Slaying Guan Hai**



●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【How could Guan Hai possibly withstand Yunchang? After several dozen rounds, the Green Dragon Blade rose and cut Guan Hai down from his horse.】

●→ **Ye Edition:** 【How could Guan Hai possibly withstand Yunchang? After several rounds, the Green Dragon Blade rose and cut Guan Hai down from his horse.】

○→ **Analysis:** “Several rounds” is far more dominant than “several dozen rounds.” The Ye Edition glorifies Guan Yu more strongly than the Jiajing Edition.

●→ The Value of Yan Liang and Wen Chou

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【Yuan Shao was overjoyed and said, “If I were to obtain Yunchang, it would be as though Yan Liang and Wen Chou had returned to life!”】
(Guan Yu = Yan Liang + Wen Chou)

●→ **Yu Edition—the corresponding passage is missing from the Ye Edition:** 【Yuan Shao was overjoyed and said, “If I obtain Yunchang, he would surpass Yan Liang and Wen Chou even if they returned to life!”】
(Guan Yu > Yan Liang + Wen Chou)

○→ **Analysis:** With the single word “surpass,” the Yu Edition places Guan Yu above the combined strength of the two great warriors of Hebei.

●→ Zhang Liao’s Martial Rank

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【Lord Guan said, “Zhang Liao’s martial skill is no lower than yours or mine.”】
(Zhang Liao = Guan Yu and Zhang Fei)

●→ **Ye Edition:** 【Guan Yu laughed and said, “Zhang Liao’s martial skill is no lower than yours.”】
(Zhang Liao = Zhang Fei, but below Guan Yu)

○→ **Analysis:** In the Ye Edition, Guan Yu believes that Zhang Liao is worthy only of comparison with Zhang Fei, while he himself stands at a higher level. The Ye Edition therefore glorifies Guan Yu more strongly than the Jiajing Edition. It uses Zhang Fei alone as Zhang Liao’s benchmark and removes Guan Yu entirely from the framework of “Zhang Liao = Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.”

●→ The Truth Behind Guan Yu’s Battle with Xu Huang at Fan Castle

●→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【Lord Guan flew into a rage and swung his blade to meet him. After fighting for more than eighty rounds, although Lord Guan possessed exceptional martial skill, his wounded right arm ultimately lacked strength. Guan Ping urgently sounded the gong to signal withdrawal, and Lord Guan turned his horse and rode back to camp. Shouts suddenly thundered from all directions:

武

Cao Ren, seeing that the Prince of Wei's reinforcements had arrived, hurriedly led his troops out of the city and joined forces with Xu Huang. Attacked from both sides, the Jingzhou army fell into chaos.】

☉→ **Defeat in Single Combat:** In the Jiajing Edition's narrative, Guan Yu's wounded right arm impaired his performance. After more than eighty rounds, he had already begun to show signs of being unable to hold out. Guan Ping therefore urgently sounded the gong, and Guan Yu turned his horse and withdrew to camp. The emphasis here falls upon "Guan Yu's right arm lacked strength" and "Xu Huang gained the advantage after eighty rounds."

☉→ **Ye Edition:** 【Lord Guan flew into a rage and swung his blade to meet him. Although Lord Guan possessed exceptional martial skill, his right arm ultimately lacked strength. The two generals fought for forty or fifty rounds. Guan Ping urgently sounded the gong to signal withdrawal. Lord Guan disengaged and galloped back to camp. When he asked what had happened, great shouts arose behind the formation. As it turned out, Cao Ren, seeing that a large relief army had arrived, led his troops out through the opened gates of Fan Castle, throwing the Jingzhou army into chaos.】

☉→ **The Truth:** In the Ye Edition's narrative, Guan Yu and Xu Huang fought for only forty or fifty rounds, and Guan Yu had not yet shown any clear sign of defeat. What actually disrupted the battle was Cao Ren's decision to lead his troops out of Fan Castle after seeing that a large relief army had arrived. The words "as it turned out" clarify the preceding cause: Guan Ping urgently sounded the gong not simply because Guan Yu was losing the duel, but because Cao Ren had launched an attack from the city and the Jingzhou army's formation had already fallen into disorder.

☉→ **Analysis:** Guan Yu's right arm is wounded in both editions, and Guan Ping sounds the gong in both. Yet a change in the arrangement of the wording produces a completely different combat-prowess judgment.

In the Ye Edition, Guan Yu remains undefeated after forty or fifty rounds, but Cao Ren's sortie disrupts the battle and forces the duel to end.

In the Jiajing Edition, Guan Yu fights for more than eighty rounds before his weakened right arm causes him to show signs of defeat against Xu Huang.

◆→ **Questionable Textual Alteration:** Who changed the narrative that was closer to the original intent of the Luo Edition? The author considers it highly likely that the Jiajing Edition changed "forty or fifty rounds" to "more than eighty rounds" and rearranged the chain of cause and effect, shifting the principal cause of the battlefield reversal from "Cao Ren's sortie and pincer attack" to "Guan Yu's weakened right arm."

This alteration magnified Xu Huang's advantage and made Guan Yu's defeat appear significantly more pronounced.

●→ The Bare-Handed Defense at the Ancient City Reunion

☉→ **Jiajing Edition:** 【The arrow struck Lord Guan directly in the left arm. He pulled it out with his mouth, and blood continued to flow... When Yunchang saw Yide approaching, he was overcome with joy. He handed his blade to Zhou Cang and spurred his horse forward to greet him. Zhang Fei opened his great round eyes, raised his tiger-like beard, and roared like thunder as he thrust his spear straight at Yunchang. Yunchang was greatly startled and hurriedly dodged the spear, crying, “Brother, how could you forget our oath in the Peach Garden?”... Zhang Fei said, “You still dare make excuses!” and thrust his eighteen-chi spear at him.】

☉→ **Yu Edition—the corresponding passage is missing from the Ye Edition:** 【The arrow struck Guan Yu directly in the left arm. Lord Guan bit the arrow and pulled it out, and blood continued to flow... When Yunchang saw Yide approaching, his voice sounded like a great peal of thunder. He handed his blade to Zhou Cang and spurred his horse forward to meet him. Zhang Fei opened his great round eyes, raised his tiger-like beard, and roared like thunder as he thrust his spear straight at Yunchang. Yunchang was greatly startled and hurriedly parried the spear aside. He then cried, “Brother, how could you forget our oath in the Peach Garden?”... Zhang Fei flew into a rage and shouted, “You still dare lure me into a trap!” before thrusting his eighteen-chi Serpent Spear at him.】

☉→ **Analysis:** Faced with Zhang Fei’s sudden attack, Guan Yu in the Jiajing Edition can only evade in alarm. In the Yu Edition, however, he directly parries the spear aside with what appears to be his wounded arm. Guan Yu’s reactions are clearly faster and his strength greater in the Yu Edition, which is more consistent with Luo Guanzhong’s tendency to glorify Guan Yu.

【3】 Conclusion: The Ye Edition Is the True Heir to the Luo Edition

Through the cross-comparison of these crucial textual differences, the truth has become unmistakably clear.

●→ **The Jiajing Edition’s Departure:** In numerous details, its reviser deliberately diminished and weakened Guan Yu’s displays of combat prowess. Such “suppression of Guan Yu” completely departed from Luo Guanzhong’s original creative purpose of elevating Guan Yu’s martial might to the highest possible level.

●→ **The Ye Edition’s Fidelity:** Although its language lacks the ornate refinement of later editions, in every cold, concrete detail concerning combat-prowess settings, it stands like an immovable rock, fiercely defending Guan Yu’s absolute position as a peak-level warrior.

Since the preceding evidence has already established that Luo Guanzhong's original intent was to "absolutely exalt Guan Yu," the more arrogant, more imposing, and more overwhelmingly powerful Guan Yu of the Ye Edition is unquestionably the legitimate direct heir to Luo Guanzhong's orthodox vision of martial prowess.

Like an immovable pillar anchoring the sea, this conclusion once again firmly establishes the absolute legitimacy of this book's decision to use the Ye Edition as the basis for its combat-prowess data and deductions.

Had Luo Guanzhong truly intended Lu Bu to rank first, he could never have deliberately arranged for Lu Bu to be placed at a disadvantage and even defeated by Guan Yu on as many as three occasions—since a single defeat alone would not have been sufficient to prove Guan Yu's superiority.

This ironclad evidence demonstrates that Luo Guanzhong was not a supporter of Lu Bu at all, but rather an intensely devoted advocate of Guan Yu. The central martial logic he constructed was designed to establish beyond dispute the absolute hierarchy of:

Guan Yu > Lu Bu

V. The Author's Final Choice of Edition

[1] Logical Synthesis

Which edition truly represents the Luo Edition? By combining the preceding in-depth analyses of "The Mystery of Hulao Pass" and Luo Guanzhong's intention to "exalt Guan Yu," we arrive at a clear combat-prowess spectrum.

●→ **Original Intent of the Luo Edition:** Zhang Fei and Lu Bu were approximately evenly matched, while Guan Yu was stronger than Lu Bu.

●→ **Position of the Jiajing Edition:** It tends to elevate Lu Bu above Zhang Fei while weakening Guan Yu.

●→ **Position of the Ye Edition:** It perfectly inherits the settings of the Luo Edition by presenting Zhang Fei as evenly matched with Lu Bu and strengthening Guan Yu.

Together with the textual research conducted by the numerous scholars cited in the first major section, the author firmly concludes that, in restoring the original combat-prowess settings, the Ye Edition and Yu Edition are far superior to the Jiajing Edition, which was reshaped by later literati.

Using the wrong edition as the basis of analysis would be no different from climbing a tree in search of fish. It would inevitably produce an erroneous combat-prowess ranking that runs directly contrary to Luo Guanzhong's original intent.

【2】 Why Is the Mao Edition Excluded?

As for the Mao Edition, the version most widely circulated today, its alterations and deletions are even more extensive than those of the Jiajing Edition. In order to impose their personal literary aesthetics and private views on combat prowess, the Mao father and son subjected the original work to extensive “cosmetic reconstruction” and “mutilation.”

A version distorted to such a severe degree naturally has even less authority for investigating Luo Guanzhong’s original combat-prowess framework.

【3】 This Book’s Operating Standard: A Complementary Two-Edition Method

Although the Ye Edition is the closest in content to the Luo Edition, it undeniably contains numerous typographical errors and missing pages. To compensate for these physical deficiencies, this book establishes a rigorous “complementary two-edition strategy”:

The Ye Fengchun Edition serves as the primary base text—the skeleton. Whenever passages are missing, the closely related Yu Xiangdou Edition is used to restore them—the flesh and blood.

Through this methodology of “the Ye Edition as the primary source and the Yu Edition as the supplement,” we can penetrate the mists of history to the greatest possible extent and guide readers into the most authentic combat-prowess world of the Luo Edition.

As the saying goes, choosing the right direction matters more than effort alone. The correct foundation must come first. Only when the edition is right can the combat-prowess rankings of Romance of the Three Kingdoms be ranked correctly.

VI. Summary of the Edition Debate

Based on the textual research and arguments presented in the five major sections above, we can now reach the following final characterization of the three principal editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

【1】 The Jiajing Edition: A Refined and Sanitized Text

The Jiajing Edition is essentially a secondary revision based on an “old edition.” Its defining features are literary polishing, smoother and more elegant prose, and careful proofreading, resulting in relatively few textual errors. Yet it is precisely this “refinement” that caused it to depart from the rough and unembellished form of the earliest text.

【2】 The Ye Edition and Yu Edition: Rough Uncut Stones

Although the Ye Edition and Yu Edition contain relatively more textual errors and misprinted characters, the very fact that they did not undergo extensive alteration by later literati allowed them to preserve more completely the original wording of the “old editions” and even the Luo Edition.

【3】 Final Conclusion on the Choice of Edition

The Jiajing Edition’s principal advantage lies only in its earlier “date of publication”—that is, the age of its physical form. The value of the Ye Edition and Yu Edition, by contrast, lies in the greater antiquity of their “textual evolution,” as they preserve more of Luo Guanzhong’s original textual markers.

Therefore, this book’s decision to use the Ye Edition and Yu Edition for its combat-prowess rankings is the choice that most faithfully carries forward Luo Guanzhong’s original conception of combat prowess.

FIRE

PHOENIX

RAVAGES

OF

TIME

BLAZING

PLAINS

Fundamental Theories of Combat Prowess in Romance of the Three Kingdoms

When analyzing combat prowess, the author established a rigorous theoretical foundation. This system was developed through the induction and deduction of all 547 battle cases in the book and ultimately distilled into twenty-two core theories. These are the twenty-two sections of fundamental combat-prowess theory listed in the table of contents overview on P. [12]. Together, they interlock to form a complete analytical framework for the author's combat-prowess assessments.

In addition, the author will carefully cite relevant historical materials and scholarly sources concerning Romance of the Three Kingdoms as supporting evidence, thereby strengthening the depth and credibility of the arguments.

The author's heading hierarchy is shown below. Section One of the Fundamental Theories of Combat Prowess begins on the following page.

Main Heading: **Bold black type**

Subheading: **Blue type**

Third-Level Heading: **Green type**

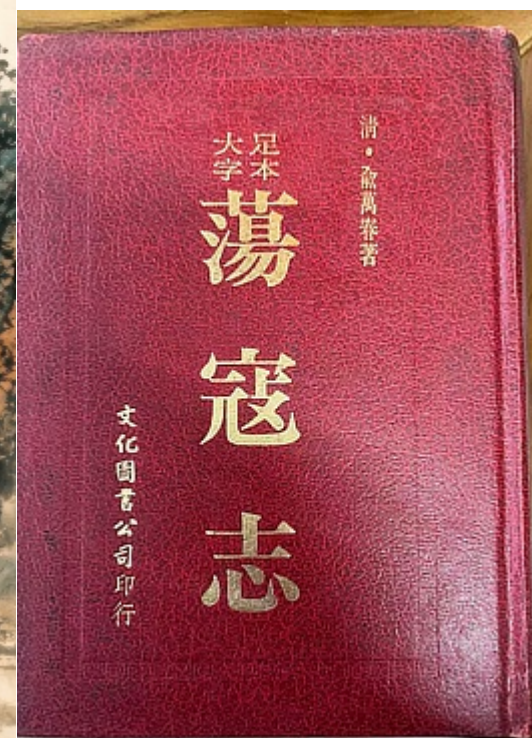
Fourth-Level Heading: Purple type with “”

Fifth-Level Heading: Light blue type with “”

Sixth-Level Heading: Orange type with “”

Seventh-Level Heading: Dark teal type with “”

Eighth-Level Heading: Yellow type with “”



Source: Dangkou Zhi by Qing-dynasty writer Yu Wanchun—Chen Liqing once commented on characters from Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Section One: Detailed Explanation of Combat-Prowess Positioning and the Tier System

I. Origins: Quantitative Standards in an Age of Chaos

When Luo Guanzhong created *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, he introduced many celebrated fierce warriors, yet he never provided a precise definition of their relative strength in combat prowess. The book contains both prolonged stalemates in which warriors “fought for three hundred rounds without a decisive outcome” and instantaneous kills in which “the blade rose and the opponent fell from his horse.”

To establish a rigorous evaluative standard within this ambiguous narrative framework, this book introduces the concept of “combat-prowess positioning”—the Martial Tier System. Its purpose is first to divide the complex abilities of the warriors into broad tiers and then to quantify their relative strength on a more detailed level.

II. Core Structure: A Groundbreaking “Pyramid” System

Most mainstream systems for evaluating combat prowess in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* collectively classify the ten highest-ranking warriors as belonging to the “super-elite tier.” However, after conducting an in-depth study of the original text, the author discovered that this traditional classification is no longer sufficient to encompass the full scope of the combat-prowess system created by Luo Guanzhong.

Above the super-elite tier stands one exceptional warrior. When this warrior enters a state of peak explosive performance, the resulting dominance and numerical performance clearly surpass those of the other nine super-elite warriors.

To present this “discontinuous” level of superiority objectively, this book establishes the unique supreme designation of “the Greatest Warrior Under Heaven.”

Between the highest-tier warriors and conventional experts, there is often a vast gap. To reconstruct the full spectrum of combat prowess with greater precision, this book introduces two transitional tiers between the “super-elite tier” and the “strong first-rate tier”: the “quasi-super-elite tier” and the “top-tier first-rate tier.”

Design Rationale: This is not merely a matter of terminology. These tiers were created to identify with precision those exceptional warriors who are stronger than ordinary first-rate generals, yet still slightly inferior to the highest-level divine warriors.

III. Micro-Level Ranking: Relative Strength Within the Same Tier

After establishing the broad combat-prowess tiers, this book further ranks warriors within each individual tier. Within the same combat-prowess classification, a warrior placed nearer the top is considered slightly stronger, while one placed nearer the bottom is considered relatively weaker.

This means that even among warriors assigned to the same tier, there remains a distinction between those at the head of the group and those at its lower end.

IV. Master Table of Combat-Prowess Tiers

This book rigorously classifies the 541 warriors appearing in Romance of the Three Kingdoms into the following thirty-eight combat-prowess tiers, arranged from strongest to weakest.

【Divine Domain】 : The Greatest Warrior Under Heaven (the sole supreme warrior, limited to one individual).

【Near-Divine Domain】 : Super-Elite Tier (the great tiger generals of the age, totaling nine warriors).

【Quasi-Divine Domain】 : Quasi-Super-Elite Tier.

【Transcendent Domain】 : Top-Tier First-Rate Tier.

【First-Rate Generals】 : Strong First-Rate Tier, Mid-Level First-Rate Tier, and Weak First-Rate Tier.

【Second-Rate Mainstays】 : Strong Second-Rate Tier, Mid-Level Second-Rate Tier, and Weak Second-Rate Tier.

【Third-Rate Warriors】 : Strong Third-Rate Tier, Mid-Level Third-Rate Tier, and Weak Third-Rate Tier.

【Bottom-Tier Small Fry】 : Strong Fourth-Rate Tier, followed by the corresponding intermediate tiers—twenty-two combat-prowess tiers are omitted here—down to the Weak Eleventh-Rate Tier.

【Noncombatants】 : Unranked Tier, including civil officials, commoners, noncombatant women, and others. Because this category does not possess high-level competitive combat prowess, its members are not ranked internally by relative strength.

UNDER HEAVEN

THE GREATEST
WARRIOR UNDER
HEAVEN (1)

[DIVINE DOMAIN]

SUPER-ELITE TIER (9)

[NEAR-DIVINE DOMAIN]

QUASI-SUPER-ELITE TIER

[QUASI-DIVINE DOMAIN]

TOP-TIER FIRST-RATE TIER

[TRANSCENDENT DOMAIN]

STRONG / MID-LEVEL / WEAK
FIRST-RATE TIER

[FIRST-RATE GENERALS]

STRONG / MID-LEVEL / WEAK
SECOND-RATE TIER

[SECOND-RATE MAINSTAYS]

STRONG / MID-LEVEL / WEAK
THIRD-RATE TIER

[THIRD-RATE WARRIORS]

BOTTOM-TIER SMALL FRY
(FOURTH- TO ELEVENTH-RATE TIERS)

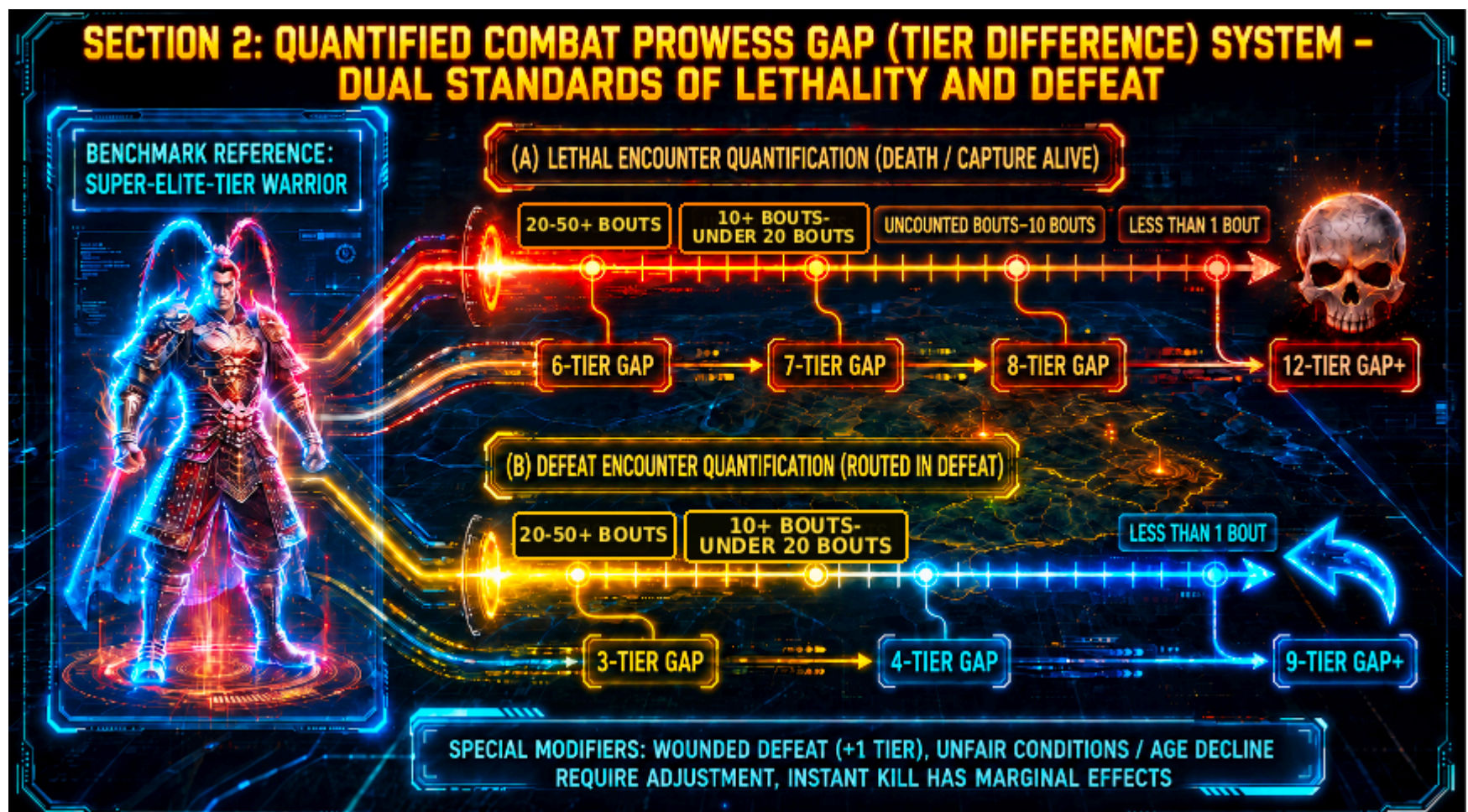
[BOTTOM-TIER
SMALL FRY]

UNRANKED TIER
(NONCOMBATANTS)

[NONCOMBATANTS]

CHART:
ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS
COMBAT PROWESS TIER PYRAMID

Section Two: Quantitative System for Combat-Prowess Tier Gaps



【Core Visual Logic: Dual-Track Quantitative Scale】

Benchmark Anchor: The entire diagram uses the “Super-Elite-Tier Warrior” on the left as the absolute reference point—a zero-tier gap.

●→ **Red Track (Lethality Determination):** Represents an overwhelming disparity in strength. If a warrior is killed or captured alive, even after holding out for twenty rounds, there may still be an enormous gap of as many as seven tiers. If the warrior is instantly killed in less than one round, the gap expands to twelve tiers or more.

●→ **Yellow-Blue Track (Defeat Determination):** Represents a clear difference in strength. If a warrior is merely defeated and driven off without being killed, then under the same round count, that warrior is generally rated approximately three tiers higher than one who dies.

●→ **Conclusion:** Survival itself is proof of strength. The ability to be “defeated but not killed” by a super-elite-tier warrior is the gold standard for measuring the true value of a first-rate general.

【1】 Core Definition: A Scale for Measuring Differences in Strength

Definition: After establishing the combat-prowess positioning pyramid, we need a scale to measure the specific differences between its various tiers. This book defines the disparity in strength across different positioning levels as the “Martial Grade Gap,” commonly referred to as a “tier gap.”



●→ Calculation Examples

●→ **Adjacent Tier Gap:** The difference between the “Super-Elite Tier” and the “Quasi-Super-Elite Tier” is one Martial Grade Gap.

●→ **Cross-Tier Gap:** The difference between the “Super-Elite Tier” and the “Mid-Level Second-Rate Tier” is seven Martial Grade Gaps.

●→ **Large-Span Tier Gap:** The difference between the “Quasi-Super-Elite Tier” and the “Mid-Level Fourth-Rate Tier” is twelve Martial Grade Gaps.

II. The Golden Standard: Practical Combat Quantification Using the “Super-Elite Tier” as the Benchmark

This book’s Martial Grade Gap system is not an arbitrary invention. Rather, it is a rigorous “Battle Outcome vs. Martial Grade Gap Reference Table” established on the basis of the numerous combat descriptions found throughout Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

To ensure a unified standard, the author uses warriors of the “Super-Elite Tier,” whose combat prowess is the most stable, as the benchmark reference. By examining the “number of rounds” and the “final outcome” when other warriors fight against a super-elite-tier opponent, the author works backward to determine their Martial Grade Gaps and establish their combat-prowess positioning.

These Martial Grade Gaps apply to any pair of combat-prowess tiers and are not limited solely to comparisons between the Super-Elite Tier and other tiers.

III. Quantitative Table of Battle Outcomes

(Benchmark Reference: Super-Elite-Tier Warrior)

Based on an in-depth quantitative analysis of the original text, this book derives the following two core quantitative standards.

(A) Quantitative Table for Lethal Engagements

(Result: Killed or Captured Alive)

●→ **Applicable Scenarios:** This table applies to battles that end with one side being killed or captured alive.

NUMBER OF BOUTS FOUGHT AGAINST A SUPER-ELITE-TIER WARRIOR	COMBAT PROWESS GAP (BELOW THE SUPER-ELITE TIER)	NOTES: KILLED OR CAPTURED ALIVE
20 BOUTS–50+ BOUTS	6 TIERS	POSSESSES CONSIDERABLE RESISTANCE
10+ BOUTS–UNDER 20 BOUTS	7 TIERS	
UNCOUNTED BOUTS–10 BOUTS	8 TIERS	
3 BOUTS–5 BOUTS	9 TIERS	
2 BOUTS–UNDER 3 BOUTS	10 TIERS	
1 BOUT–UNDER 2 BOUTS	11 TIERS	NEARLY AN INSTANT KILL
LESS THAN 1 BOUT	12 TIERS OR MORE	INSTANT KILL (SEE SPECIAL NOTES BELOW)

(B) Quantitative Table for Defeat Engagements

(Result: Defeated and Driven Off, but Neither Killed nor Captured)

●→ **Applicable Scenarios:** This table applies to battles in which one side is defeated but successfully escapes. Analysis shows that, under the same round count, being “merely defeated” generally indicates combat prowess approximately three Martial Grade Gaps higher than that of a warrior who is killed or captured alive.

NUMBER OF BOUTS FOUGHT AGAINST A SUPER-ELITE-TIER WARRIOR	COMBAT PROWESS GAP (BELOW THE SUPER-ELITE TIER)	NOTES: DEFEATED ONLY
20 BOUTS–50+ BOUTS	3 TIERS	CAN SUSTAIN A MEDIUM-TO-LONG ENGAGEMENT AGAINST A SUPER-ELITE-TIER WARRIOR
10+ BOUTS–UNDER 20 BOUTS	4 TIERS	
UNCOUNTED BOUTS–10 BOUTS	5 TIERS	REFERENCE CASE: YU JIN WAS DEFEATED BY MA CHAO IN 9 BOUTS
3 BOUTS–5 BOUTS	6 TIERS	
2 BOUTS–UNDER 3 BOUTS	7 TIERS	
1 BOUT–UNDER 2 BOUTS	8 TIERS	
LESS THAN 1 BOUT	9 TIERS OR MORE	ROUTED IMMEDIATELY UPON FIRST CONTACT OR BEFORE EXCHANGING BLOWS

IV. Dynamic Adjustment Parameters

Actual combat conditions are complex and highly variable. The two tables on the preceding page cannot encompass every possible situation; therefore, the following adjustment parameters must be introduced.

【1】 Spectrum of Battle Outcomes (Ranked by Evidentiary Weight)

●→ **The order in which battle outcomes reflect relative strength is:** Draw > Not Defeated > Narrowly Defeated > Defeated > Wounded and Defeated > Killed ≈ Captured Alive

☉→ **Note:** Being captured alive and being killed are essentially equivalent as indicators of strength, although capture carries greater psychological humiliation.

【2】 Special Adjustment Rules

●→ **Wounded-Defeat Adjustment:** If a warrior is wounded and defeated but survives, the warrior may generally be raised by one tier from the result indicated in the “Quantitative Table for Lethal Engagements.”

●→ **Unequal-Engagement Adjustment:** If a battle involves disruptive factors such as a surprise attack, being ganged up on, a major disparity in troop strength, or unfavorable terrain, the assigned Martial Grade Gap must be adjusted upward or downward as appropriate. This rule applies to all Martial Grade Gaps, including kills, captures, injuries, and defeats occurring in less than one round.

【3】 Special Notes on “Less Than One Round” and Age

●→ **The Martial Grade Gap for “less than one round” is marked as “9, 12, or more.”**

This is because when the target is excessively weak—such as the unranked Diao chan—whether the attacker is a top-tier warrior such as Guan Yu or Gan Ning, or a bottom-tier military officer such as Huang Zu, all are capable of killing, capturing, wounding, or defeating the target in less than one round.

☉→ **Conclusion:** At this point, the outcome itself exhibits diminishing marginal returns and can no longer distinguish the relative strength of the attackers. Therefore, Martial Grade Gaps of thirteen, fourteen, or even more must be introduced to reflect the differences between them. Whether the value is adjusted upward or downward from the dividing points of nine or twelve depends on the advantages and disadvantages present under the circumstances.

●→ **Age-Related Decline Adjustment:** A warrior around sixty years old is regarded as having undergone only a slight decline, requiring no adjustment. A warrior aged seventy or above is considered elderly and, in principle, should receive a downward Martial Grade Gap adjustment.

●→ **Exception:** Zhao Yun is a special individual who possesses the “trait of constant combat prowess” (see P. [908], beneath Battle Case 457: Time Coordinate—Eve of the Northern Expeditions). Even at the age of seventy, he remains firmly positioned in the Super-Elite Tier and receives no decline adjustment.



【Core Visual Logic: The Sole Exception to the Law of Age-Related Decline】

【1】 Black Ink (The Mortal Fate): Symbolizes the irreversible erosion of time. The data show that once a warrior passes the age of sixty, physical stamina and reaction speed decline along a parabolic curve. By the age of seventy, the warrior should, in principle, be forcibly downgraded by one to two combat-prowess tiers.

【2】 Golden Light (The Zhao Yun Exception): Symbolizes the special attribute of “constant combat prowess.” At the Battle of Fengming Mountain, Zhao Yun, despite being seventy years old, single-handedly slew five generals of the Han family and charged through an army of eighty thousand as though no one stood in his path. His explosive power and endurance exhibited an astonishing “zero decline” compared with his physical prime.

【3】 Conclusion: Within this quantitative system, time may take away a hero’s life, but it cannot take away Zhao Yun’s “Super-Elite Tier” classification.

Section Three: The Foundational Benchmark for the Super-Elite Tier—Xu Chu



【Core Visual Logic: Xu Chu—the “Prime Meridian” of the Combat-Prowess Universe】

【1】 Central Stone Pillar (Absolute Anchor): Symbolizes Xu Chu’s strategic position within the quantitative system. He may not represent the “combat-prowess ceiling” of the entire book, but he is the sole “universal calibration weight.” As the Tiger Marquis of Cao Cao’s camp, he is the only warrior in the Three Kingdoms to have recorded high-quality engagements against Lu Bu, Dian Wei, Ma Chao, and Zhang Fei. He is therefore established as the origin point of the combat-prowess coordinate system.

【2】 Golden Chains (The Two-Hundred-Round Law): Symbolize an unbreakable logical connection. Through hard evidence such as his “two-hundred-round draws” against Ma Chao and Dian Wei, Xu Chu links these previously isolated powerhouses into a closed logical loop, thereby defining the threshold of the “Core Super-Elite Group”:

$Xu Chu \approx Dian Wei \approx Ma Chao \approx Zhang Fei \approx Lu Bu$

【3】 Conclusion (All Principles Converge into One): Xu Chu is the “Greenwich Mean Time” of Three Kingdoms combat-prowess evaluation. Only by establishing this stone pillar can we move beyond subjective speculation of the “Guan Yu fighting Qin Qiong” variety and truly enter a new era of rigorous quantification.

I. Establishing the Benchmark: Why Xu Chu?

When constructing the vast combat-prowess system of the Three Kingdoms, identifying a stable and reliable benchmark is essential. After rigorous textual research, this book selects the Cao Wei fierce warrior Xu Chu as the origin point for establishing the “Super-Elite Tier” classification.

The reason is that, throughout Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Xu Chu possesses the highest-quality record of engagements against top-level warriors. He fought in succession against such peerless fighters as Lu Bu, Dian Wei, Ma Chao, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, and Gao Lan. Among the Five Tiger Generals, Huang Zhong was the only one he never encountered. His battle record therefore possesses exceptionally high referential value and broad applicability.

Once Xu Chu is established as the benchmark for the “Super-Elite Tier,” we can use the dual verification of “actual battle records” and “laudatory verses in the text” to derive the first core group of “Super-Elite-Tier” warriors.

II. Actual Battle Records: The Equivalence Chain Based on the “Two-Hundred-Round Draw Law”

In duels between top-tier warriors, if both sides fight for approximately two hundred rounds—equivalent to about five hours according to the book’s internal time scale; see Section Four for the conversion between rounds and time—without a decisive outcome, this book presumes that they belong to the same combat-prowess tier and that the difference between them is extremely small.

【1】 Xu Chu’s Direct Matchups

●→ Xu Chu $\approx$ Dian Wei: See Battle Case 93. The two fought at Ge Slope from the Chen hour to the Wu hour, then resumed fighting until dusk, accumulating more than two hundred rounds without a decisive outcome.

●→ Xu Chu $\approx$ Ma Chao: See Battle Case 306. At the Battle of Wei Bridge, Xu Chu stripped off his armor and fiercely fought Ma Chao, with the duel likewise exceeding two hundred rounds without a decisive outcome.

【2】 Derivation Through Transitive Equivalence

●→ Ma Chao $\approx$ Zhang Fei: See Battle Case 336. At the Battle of Jiameng Pass, the two continued their duel by torchlight into the night, accumulating approximately two hundred rounds or more without a decisive outcome.

●→ Zhang Fei $\approx$ Lu Bu: See Battle Case 32—the Battle of the Three Heroes Against Lu Bu, approximately eighty rounds; Battle Case 110—Lu Bu did not dare press Zhang Fei too hard; Battle Case 131—more than one hundred rounds at Xuzhou; and Battle Case 151—Lu Bu was defeated and driven off after an unspecified number of rounds. Across these four recorded engagements, Zhang Fei and Lu Bu also

accumulated close to two hundred rounds of essentially even combat.

[3] Summary of the Battle Evidence

By using Xu Chu as the central node and applying the principle of transitive combat-prowess equivalence—if $A = B$, $B = C$, $C = D$, and $D = E$, then $A = E$ —we can derive a stable closed loop of combat-prowess equivalence.

Formula: Dian Wei (200 rounds) = Xu Chu (200 rounds) = Ma Chao (200 rounds) = Zhang Fei (200 rounds) = Lu Bu (200 rounds)

III. Laudatory Verses in the Text: Luo Guanzhong's Original "Combat-Prowess Positioning"

In addition to actual battle records, the laudatory verses in the original text often represent Luo Guanzhong's authoritative assessment of a character's combat prowess.

[1] The Key Laudatory Verse Establishing "Xu Chu $\approx$ Lu Bu"

●→ In both the Ye Edition and the Jiajing Edition, after Xu Chu submits to Cao Cao, the text includes the following key laudatory verse: 【With Xu Chu of Ge Slope now in submission, why ever fear Lu Bu's might again!】

☉→ **Interpretation of the Verse:** This verse directly indicates that, in the author's view, acquiring Xu Chu gave Cao Cao a fighting force capable of contending with Lu Bu—that is, "Xu Chu $\approx$ Lu Bu." This is highly consistent with the conclusion derived above from their actual records of two-hundred-round draws.

☉→ **Scholarly Note:** The Qing-dynasty Mao Edition deleted this verse during its revision. The author believes that this was an arbitrary deletion intended to manufacture an image of Lu Bu as having been quietly elevated into first place, thereby seriously distorting Luo Guanzhong's original combat-prowess framework. In its assessments, this book therefore gives greater weight to the Ye Edition, which more closely preserves the original intent.

[2] The Laudatory Verse Establishing "Zhang Fei $\approx$ Lu Bu"

●→ After Zhang Fei's great battle against Lu Bu at Hulao Pass, a laudatory verse summarizes the strength of the two warriors as follows: 【After fierce combat, neither could decide victory or defeat.】

☉→ **Interpretation of the Verse:** This verse once again confirms the combat-prowess positioning of "Zhang Fei $\approx$ Lu Bu." It also accords with the battle evidence indicating that the two would necessarily have needed more than two hundred rounds before either could determine victory or defeat.

IV. Overall Conclusion: Establishing the Core Super-Elite Group

Through the dual verification of the “Two-Hundred-Round Law” derived from actual battle records and the laudatory verses reflecting Luo Guanzhong’s original intent, we can establish the most central and stable “Super-Elite Group” within the combat-prowess system of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Under the conditions of a fair one-on-one duel, any matchup among Xu Chu, Dian Wei, Ma Chao, Zhang Fei, and Lu Bu would begin as a prolonged battle lasting at least two hundred rounds—approximately five hours. Since Xu Chu is established as the foundational benchmark of the “Super-Elite Tier,” rigorous logical deduction dictates that the other four must likewise be classified within the Super-Elite Tier beyond any reasonable dispute.

No matter how extravagantly Lu Bu’s battle against the Three Heroes is praised, he ultimately cannot escape the “curse” of the Super-Elite Group. Even if Lu Bu could defeat Xu Chu, it would happen only after at least two hundred rounds. Therefore, can Lu Bu—who failed against the Three Heroes—truly be elevated to the Greatest Warrior Under Heaven on the strength of that battle alone? First, ask Xu Chu’s two hundred rounds!

“Two-Hundred-Round Law” Verification
Luo Guanzhong’s Original Intent and Actual Battle Verification

Battle Feed
“Two-Hundred-Round Law”:
“Two-Hundred-Round Law”: Verified through actual battle records and laudatory verses.
Lu Bu’s “Curse”:
Even if Lu Bu can defeat Xu Chu, it would happen only after at least two hundred rounds.

Round: 210/∞
Battle Time: 5:03:15

Strongest Lu Bu
“Extraordinary Elite Group”
HP 1220 / 1500
Spirit

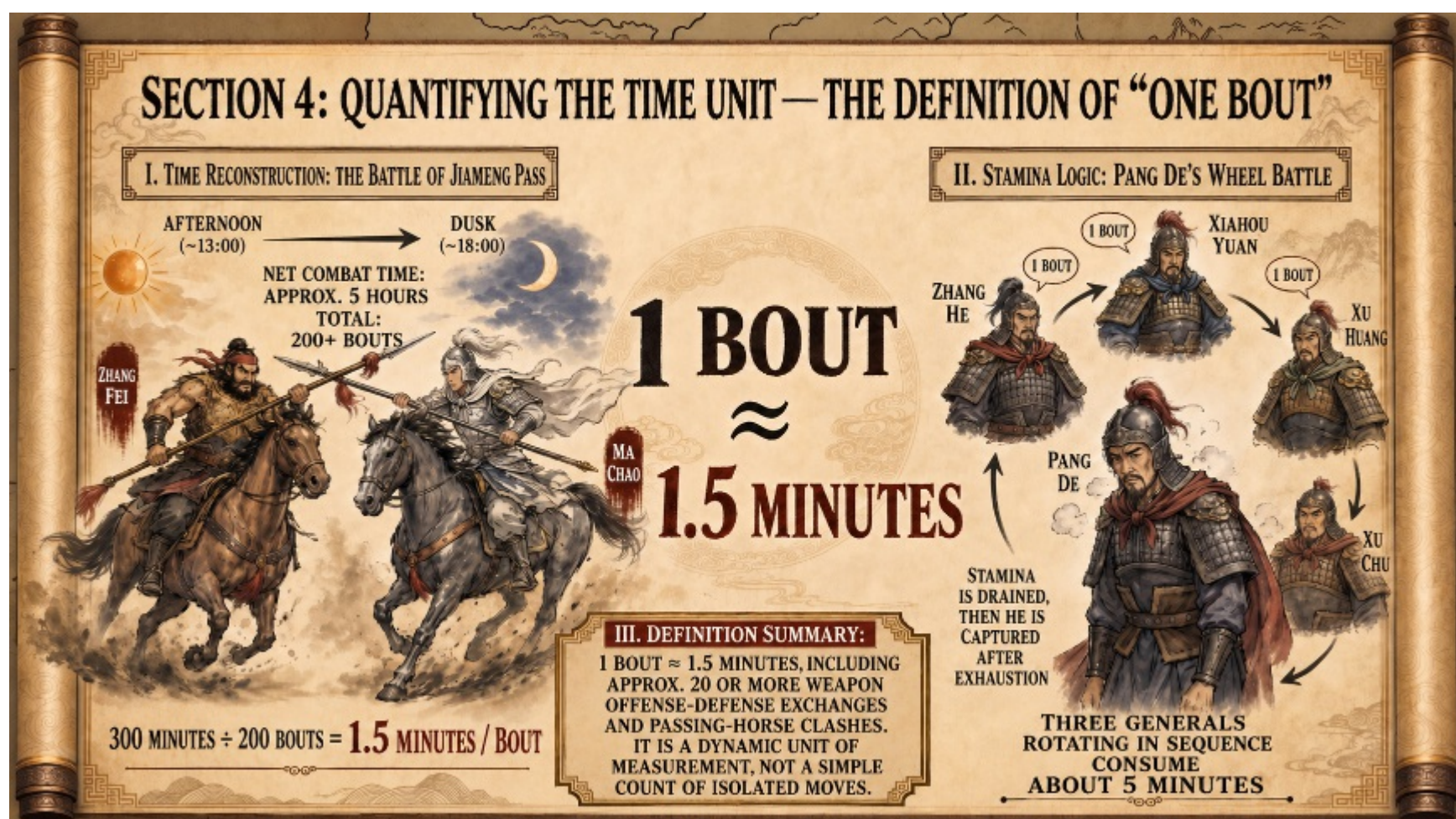
Basal Benchmark
“Extraordinary Elite Group”
HP 1200 / 580
Spirit

System Conclusion
Conclusion: Lu Bu cannot be hailed as ‘Unparalleled Under Heaven’ solely based on his battle against the Three Heroes. This is because he must first answer Xu Chu’s ‘Two Hundred Rounds’!

EXTRAORDINARY ELITE GROUP
[Zhang Fei] [Ma Chao] [Dian Wei] [Xu Chu] [Lu Bu]

Even after two hundred rounds, Lu Bu could only fight Xu Chu to a draw—he was merely on the same level as Ma Chao.

Section Four: Quantifying the Unit of Time —The Definition of “One Round”



【Core Visual Logic: The Physical Definition and Stamina Logic of “One Round”】

【1】 Left Scroll—Macroscopic Reconstruction (Time Anchor): Battle Case 336, the Battle of Jiameng Pass, serves as the point of measurement. Zhang Fei fought Ma Chao from the early afternoon—approximately 1:00 p.m.—until nightfall—approximately 6:00 p.m.—for a net combat duration of roughly 300 minutes and more than 200 rounds. Applying the formula $300 \div 200$ yields the precise physical definition:

“One round $\approx$ 1.5 minutes.”

【2】 Right Scroll—Microscopic Logic (Stamina Verification): Battle Case 344, “Pang De’s Successive Duels,” provides supporting evidence from the perspective of stamina. Three generals from Cao Cao’s camp took turns wearing Pang De down. Their three rounds lasted approximately five minutes and only then created an opportunity to exhaust him, allowing Xu Chu to finish the job. This proves that a “round” is not an instantaneous action, but a high-intensity process of physical exertion encompassing a charge, exchanges of blows, turning the horse, and repositioning.

【3】 Conclusion: Reject video-game-style interpretations. In the novel, “one round” is a dynamic tactical unit lasting approximately ninety seconds. It includes roughly twenty weapon clashes and offensive and defensive exchanges as the horses pass one another, forming the basic unit for measuring the rate at which a warrior’s stamina is depleted.

I. Correcting a Common Misconception: What Is “One Round”?

【1】 Common Misconception

●→ When studying *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a common misconception is to interpret “one round” simply as a single clash of weapons between the two sides—one attack and one counterattack. The author believes that this interpretation differs fundamentally from Luo Guanzhong’s original spatiotemporal framework and cannot explain how Zhang Fei’s two-hundred-round duel against Ma Chao corresponds to approximately five hours of combat.

【2】 Definition Used in This Book

●→ To establish precise standards for quantifying combat prowess, the author defines a “round” as follows through the dual verification of “time reconstruction” and “stamina logic.”

II. Time Reconstruction: Mathematical Calculation Based on the Battle of Jiameng Pass

See Battle Case 336, Zhang Fei vs. Ma Chao. The book explicitly records that the two fought from the “early afternoon” until “night had fallen,” after which they lit torches and continued fighting into the night.

【1】 Battle-Case Data

●→ **Time Span:** From the early afternoon—approximately 1:00 p.m.—to nightfall—approximately 6:00 p.m. After deducting the brief pauses for rest and changing horses, the net combat duration was approximately five hours, or 300 minutes.

●→ **Total Number of Rounds:** The book records that the two fought for approximately 200-plus rounds in total.

【2】 **Calculation Formula:** 300 minutes ÷ 200 rounds = 1.5 minutes per round

【3】 **Conclusion:** In a high-intensity one-on-one duel, the average duration of one round is approximately 1.5 minutes.

III. Stamina Logic: Tactical Analysis Based on “Pang De’s Successive Duels”

See Battle Case 344, Cao Cao’s successive-warrior tactics against Pang De. To compel Pang De to surrender, Cao Cao ordered Zhang He, Xiahou Yuan, and Xu Huang to take turns fighting him. The purpose was to wear down his stamina until he became 【exhausted】, after which he could be captured.

【1】 **Reconstructing the Battle:** The book records that Zhang He, Xiahou Yuan, 73 and Xu Huang each fought Pang De for 【one round】 before withdrawing. In the

Ye Edition, each engagement lasted only one round.

【2】 Testing the Logical Fallacy (Assumption: One Round = Five Seconds)

Suppose we accept the claim that “one round” means a single exchange of attacks lasting approximately five seconds. What possible exhausting effect could be achieved by fighting a fierce warrior such as Pang De for only five seconds before withdrawing? Rather than leaving Pang De 【exhausted】, this would resemble nothing more than a warm-up exercise.

【3】 Reasonable Deduction (Assumption: One Round = 1.5 Minutes)

Only the author’s definition that “one round $\approx$ 1.5 minutes” provides a reasonable explanation. Only under this interpretation could three generals, fighting in succession for approximately five minutes in total, plausibly accomplish the tactical objective of leaving Pang De 【exhausted】.

IV. Definition Summary

In summary, this book defines “one round” according to the following standard:

Final Standard

●→ **One Round $\approx$ 1.5 Minutes:** Encompassing approximately twenty or more offensive and defensive weapon exchanges, including clashes as the riders pass one another.

⊙→ **Conceptual Definition:** It is a dynamic unit of measurement that incorporates both the passage of time and the expenditure of physical stamina, rather than merely counting individual actions.



Section Five: The Ultimate Unit of Combat— The Definition of “Less Than One Round”



【Core Visual Logic: Instant Hell Slaughter—“Less Than One Round”】

【1】 Left Side—The Physical Limit (Instant Kill): Depicts the absolute speed of “the hand rises and the blade falls.” When the disparity in combat prowess becomes great enough to tear directly through the opponent’s defensive reactions, the battle no longer involves any back-and-forth exchange, leaving only a one-sided slaughter. When Guan Yu slew Yan Liang, the entire process lasted less than one second: there was only an attack, never a counterattack.

【2】 Right Side—The Psychological Limit (Intimidation): Depicts battlefield domination so overwhelming that the opponent “flees at the mere sight of him.” Combat is not merely a clash of weapons, but also a contest of wills. When one warrior’s presence is sufficient to crush the opponent’s will to fight—as with the intimidating might of Lu Bu or Guan Yu—and the opponent “flees without daring to engage,” the result likewise falls within the category of “less than one round.”

【3】 Conclusion: “Less than one round” does not describe a combat process, but the ultimate expression of a combat outcome. It represents the “zone of ineffective resistance” within the quantitative system and serves as the exclusive designation for a superior warrior delivering a “dimensionality-reduction strike” against a weaker opponent.

I. Basic Concept: What Does “Less Than One Round” Mean?

Definition and Distinction

●→ Within this book’s quantitative system, “less than one round” represents the most extreme manifestation of a disparity in combat prowess. Many readers commonly regard “one round” as an instant kill. However, according to the definition established in the preceding section, one round lasts approximately 1.5 minutes and already encompasses about twenty back-and-forth exchanges on the battlefield.

☉→ A true “instant kill” must occur before the two sides’ weapons complete even a single full offensive-and-defensive cycle—one attack and one counterattack.

◎→ This book strictly defines the following two battlefield scenarios as “less than one round”: instant killing and intimidation.

II. Instant Kill: The Moment of Weapon Contact

[1] Key Phrases

When the original text uses key phrases such as 【the hand rose】, 【the spear rose】, 【the blade rose】, 【immediately slew】, 【with one spear thrust】, 【with one blade strike】, or 【with one halberd strike】, the author defines the outcome as “less than one round.”

[2] Core Analysis

●→ **Action Analysis:** At this point, the weapons of the two sides complete only the “attack”—the initial contact—without any “counterattack.”

●→ **Time Quantification:** The entire process generally lasts only about one second.

●→ **Tactical Significance:** This represents the crushing dominance of absolute strength. The weaker warrior is slain the instant the stronger warrior attacks. This is a true “instant kill” in less than one round, rather than a “kill within one round” lasting approximately 1.5 minutes.

III. Intimidation: The Outcome Is Determined Once the Intent to Fight Is Established

[1] Definition and Logic

●→ **Flees Without Daring to Engage:** In addition to physical contact, when one side has clearly demonstrated the intent to engage in single combat on a battlefield or in any setting where combat is possible—for example, by drawing a weapon and charging—even if the weapons of the two sides have not yet made actual contact, this book still classifies the outcome as “less than one round” so long as the



weaker side, overawed by the stronger warrior's might, "flees without daring to engage."

☉→ **Quantitative Precision:** Although such situations could theoretically be subdivided into 0.5 rounds or even 0.05 rounds, this book uniformly classifies all of them as "less than one round" for the sake of statistical consistency.

☉→ **Adjudication Logic:** The essence of combat is to defeat the opponent. Once one side loses the will to fight and flees due to intimidation, the battle has logically already ended. It is therefore classified as "less than one round," representing an outcome reached within an extremely short period of time.

【2】 Limitations on Adjudication

However, not every confrontation that ends without an exchange of blows can determine which side is stronger. The following two situations must be distinguished.

●→ **Unsuccessful Intimidation (Ineffective Standoff):** If the intimidating side ultimately fails to force the other side to flee, and the two merely remain locked in a standoff until the situation ends naturally—for example, when both sides withdraw their troops—then their relative strength cannot be determined. This book classifies them as belonging to the "same level of strength," represented by the symbol $\approx$.

●→ **Psychological Collapse (Effective Suppression):** If the pressured side barely manages to hold its ground without fleeing, but the original text explicitly describes that side as feeling "extreme fear"—for example, being at a loss, trembling with terror, or turning deathly pale—then the warrior's psychological defenses have already collapsed. Even without an actual retreat, the relative superiority of the two sides can still be determined:

Intimidating Side > Pressured Side



Section Six: The Ultimate Form of Intimidation—Determining “Fled Without Daring to Engage”



【Core Visual Logic: The Visualization of Intimidation—The Collapse of “Fled Without Daring to Engage”】

【1】 Background—The Projection of Lu Bu (Absolute Overwhelming Superiority): Referring to Battle Case 13, the gigantic black silhouette of Lu Bu blots out the sky, symbolizing the psychological suggestion of being “invincible.” This suffocating visual impression presents in an intuitive way what is meant by a “discontinuous gap in combat prowess,” demonstrating that the aura of a superior warrior is itself a spiritual weapon.

【2】 Foreground—The Grand Preceptor’s Rout (The Instinct for Survival): Dong Zhuo, obese and panic-stricken, throws away his helmet and armor as he flees, vividly illustrating the true meaning of “fled without daring to engage.” This proves that in the face of extreme fear, even a tyrannical warlord can lose the courage to swing his blade, with reason yielding completely to the instinct for survival.

【3】 Conclusion: Victory and defeat are decided before the clash begins. This image does not depict a literal battle, but a battle of the mind. It establishes a standard—when one side has been stripped even of the courage to “test the waters,” the Martial Grade Gap has already widened into the category of “fled without daring to engage.”

I. Analysis of the Phenomenon: Absolute Overwhelming Superiority in Combat-Prowess Positioning

What does it mean to “flee without daring to engage”? It is the ultimate battlefield manifestation of a disparity in combat prowess reaching its critical threshold. Before weapons even clash at close quarters, the weaker side may already have accurately recognized a “discontinuous gap in strength” between the two combatants. Alternatively, the weaker side may be swept up in the collapse of the overall battle situation, causing the psychological line of defense to disintegrate completely before any physical exchange of weapons occurs. The result is a life-preserving decision to “abandon resistance, turn around, and flee.”

Within this book’s quantitative system, such conduct is strictly defined as “absolute intimidation” imposed by a superior warrior upon an inferior opponent. Under fair conditions, the inferior warrior has no possibility of defeating the superior warrior.

II. Typical Battle Cases: Flight Driven by the Instinct for Survival

In this type of battle case, the weaker side accurately assesses the disparity in strength and chooses to flee in order to preserve their life. Although no exchange of blows occurs, victory and defeat have already been decided.

【1】 【Battle Case 13】 : Dong Zhuo Is Defeated by Lu Bu

●→ **Battle Situation:** Although Dong Zhuo was brave, when confronted with Lu Bu’s overwhelming combat prowess, he knew that he was no match and fled without daring to engage.

【2】 【Battle Case 60】 : Niu Fu Is Defeated by Lu Bu

●→ **Battle Situation:** Overawed by Lu Bu’s might, Niu Fu fled in panic without daring to engage.

【3】 【Battle Case 68】 : Tao Qian Is Defeated by Xiahou Dun

●→ **Battle Situation:** A civil-official-type commander fled without fighting when confronted by a fierce warrior.

【4】 【Battle Case 301】 : Cao Cao Is Defeated by Ma Chao

●→ **Battle Situation:** During the episode in which Cao Cao cut off his beard and discarded his robe, he fully understood the vast disparity in combat prowess between them and chose the only viable survival strategy—fleeing for his life.



III. Tactical Paradox: The Cost of Reducing Defense to Zero

It is worth noting that a special type of “fleeing without daring to engage” can actually accelerate the weaker side’s death. Such cases reveal a brutal battlefield principle: “Turning to flee is often more dangerous than defending head-on.”

【1】 【Battle Case 18】 : Bao Zhong Is Killed by Hua Xiong
(Less Than One Round)

●→ **Action:** Bao Zhong fled out of fear of Hua Xiong, exposing his back to the enemy. Hua Xiong caught up with him and slew him with a single blade strike.

☉→ **Battle Situation:** Had Bao Zhong chosen to “hold his ground and defend,” even if he could not prevail, he might still have lasted several rounds rather than being killed instantly.

IV. Adjudication Boundaries: Distinguishing “Fled Without Daring to Engage,” Extreme Fear, and Caution (Wariness)

If a warrior is merely psychologically unwilling to launch an attack rashly, but does not exhibit both of the following conditions—an actual act of flight and extreme fear at the level of completely losing composure—then, as with the “unsuccessful intimidation” described in Section Five, the situation cannot be classified as “fled without daring to engage.”

【1】 【Non-Qualifying Battle Case 110】 : Lu Bu Is Wary of Zhang Fei

●→ **Original Text:** 【Lu Bu knew Zhang Fei was brave and likewise did not dare pursue him.】

☉→ **Adjudication:** Although Lu Bu was wary of Zhang Fei, he did not flee and continued to maintain a confrontational posture. This was caution between powerful warriors. Therefore:

Lu Bu $\approx$ Zhang Fei

[2] 【Non-Qualifying Battle Case 305】 : Ma Chao Is Wary of Xu Chu

●→ **Original Text:** 【Ma Chao feared him and dared not move, so he reined in his horse and returned.】

◎→ **Adjudication:** Although Ma Chao was apprehensive about Xu Chu's bravery, he merely reined in his horse and returned to his formation rather than fleeing in defeat. This was caution between Super-Elite-Tier warriors. Therefore:

Ma Chao ≈ Xu Chu



Ma Chao was merely afraid of Xu Chu, but not terrified to the point of wetting himself, nor did he make any attempt to flee. In the end, the two sides simply withdrew.

Section Seven: The True Combat Strength Behind “Fled Without Daring to Engage” —A Quantitative Simulation of a “Hypothetical Engagement”



【Core Visual Logic: Hypothetical-Engagement Reconstruction—The Law of the “Ten-Round Lethal Zone”】

【1】 System Logic (Behavioral Comparison): Through a “big-data reconstruction” approach, this diagram analyzes the true combat strength underlying cases of “fled without daring to engage.” The system selects valuable dual-sample cases such as Kong Xiu, Han De, and Yu Jin—warriors who both “fled without daring to engage” in some cases and actually entered combat in others—for cross-comparison, thereby simulating how many rounds they would have lasted, and what their fate would have been, had they “not fled but chosen to fight.”

【2】 Data Spectrum (Red-Zone Warning): The red zone in the diagram represents the “forbidden zone of death.”

●→ **Rapid-Kill Zone:** Warriors such as Kong Xiu and Zhu Zan might survive if they fled, but if they chose to fight, they would be killed within one round.

●→ **Brief-Survival Zone:** Warriors such as Han De, even if they barely managed to engage, would still be killed within “three rounds.”

●→ **Survival-Limit Zone:** Yu Jin, though able to hold out until “less than ten rounds” — Ma Chao defeated him in nine rounds — would then immediately collapse.

[3] Conclusion: Fear arises from an accurate instinct for survival. In cases classified as “fled without daring to engage,” the true gap between the weaker warrior and the stronger one can be fixed within an absolute interval of “certain defeat or death within ten rounds.” This is a Martial Grade Gap that cannot be crossed.

I. Proposition: Is the Fear Exaggerated?

[1] Definition of the Proposition

When a warrior chooses to “flee without daring to engage,” does this mean that he is excessively cowardly? Had he overcome his fear at that moment and chosen to face the enemy directly, how long could he actually have held out?

[2] Solution

To quantify the data from this “unrealized” battle, this book introduces the “Behavioral Comparison Method.” It selects rare battle cases from the original text in which the same warrior has both a recorded instance of “fleeing in panic” and a recorded engagement against the same opponent, using these cases as benchmark samples for the hypothetical reconstruction.

II. Sample Verification: Behavioral Comparison Between Flight and Death in Battle

Through the following four highly relevant sets of battle cases, we can precisely reconstruct the actual number of rounds underlying “fled without daring to engage.”

[1] [Rapid Kill] Survival Time: One Round or Less

●→ **Battle-Case Comparison:** Kong Xiu vs. Guan Yu

☉→ **Behavior One:** In Battle Case 175, upon first witnessing Guan Yu’s divine might, Kong Xiu did not dare engage and withdrew into the city to hide.

☉→ **Behavior Two:** In Battle Case 176, after being provoked, Kong Xiu chose to leave the city and fight Guan Yu head-on.

☉→ **Result:** He was slain by Guan Yu in “less than one round.”

●→ **Battle-Case Comparison:** Zhu Zan vs. Zhao Yun

☉→ **Behavior One:** In Battle Case 473, overawed by Zhao Yun’s might, Zhu Zan fled without daring to engage.

☉→ **Behavior Two:** In Battle Case 479, Zhu Zan encountered Zhao Yun again and chose to fight.



●→ **Result:** He was killed by Zhao Yun with a spear thrust in only “one round.”

●→ **Deduction:** This type of flight represents an “absolutely accurate instinct for survival.” Had they not fled, they would have been killed immediately.

【2】 【Short-Lived】 Survival Time: Less Than Three Rounds

●→ **Battle-Case Comparison:** Han De vs. Zhao Yun

●→ **Behavior One:** In Battle Case 459, after witnessing all four of his sons being killed, Han De lost his nerve and fled without daring to engage.

●→ **Behavior Two:** In Battle Case 461, after regrouping his troops, Han De attempted to take revenge and fought Zhao Yun head-on.

●→ **Result:** He was cut down from his horse by Zhao Yun in “less than three rounds.”

【3】 【Limit】 Survival Time: Less Than Ten Rounds

●→ **Battle-Case Comparison:** Yu Jin vs. Ma Chao

●→ **Behavior One:** In Battle Case 298, Yu Jin attempted to fight Ma Chao head-on and held out for “eight to nine rounds” before being defeated and driven off.

●→ **Behavior Two:** In Battle Case 311, when Yu Jin encountered Ma Chao again, he drew upon the painful experience of their previous engagement and immediately fled without daring to engage.

●→ **Result:** Although he was not killed, he was defeated in “less than ten rounds.”

●→ **Deduction:** Yu Jin represents the “maximum number of rounds” for warriors who “flee without daring to engage.” Even if they can barely withstand several exchanges, they cannot survive beyond ten rounds.



III. Quantitative Conclusion: The 10-Round Death Zone

In summary, in every battle case involving “fled without daring to engage,” if the weaker side were forcibly placed into a “fight-to-the-death mode,” the number of rounds they could survive would fall within an extremely stable range:

“Less than one round (instant kill) to nine rounds (defeated and driven off / killed).”

For every weaker warrior classified in this book as having “fled without daring to engage,” the true disparity in combat strength between that warrior and the stronger opponent falls within the absolute range of “certain defeat or death within ten rounds.” This is an insurmountable gulf in combat strength.



Even Xu Chu, a Super-Elite-Tier warrior, once fled without daring to engage.

Section Eight: Quantitative Standards for “Several Rounds”

I. Background of the Definition

In the original text of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, phrases such as “fought for several rounds” or “duelled for several rounds” are frequently used to describe brief engagements between two warriors. To achieve greater numerical precision, this book conducts a textual analysis of the word “several” in order to define its specific range of rounds.

II. Textual Sources

【1】 Defining the Upper Limit (Maximum Value)

●→Original Text: 【Zhong Hui’s forces outnumbered Deng Ai’s ten to one... Our army outnumbers Deng Ai’s by several times.】

☉→Analysis: Here, “tenfold” and “severalfold” are placed in direct comparison. The context clearly indicates that the upper limit of “several” is ten; therefore, its maximum value is set at ten.

【2】 Supporting Example (Intermediate Value)

●→Original Text: 【Previously, only Lu Bu, Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, and Liu Biao were capable of opposing him. Now these several heroes have all been destroyed by Lord Cao.】

☉→Analysis: The passage explicitly lists four individuals—Lu Bu, Yuan Shu, Yuan Shao, and Liu Biao—and collectively refers to them as “several heroes.” Therefore, “several” can indeed refer to four.

【3】 Defining the Lower Limit (Minimum Value)

●→Original Text: 【Tan Stream was nearly several zhang wide... [Dilu] cleared three zhang in a single leap.】

☉→Analysis: Since the horse Dilu crossed Tan Stream with a single three-zhang leap, the width described as “several zhang” must include three zhang. Therefore, the minimum value of “several” is set at three.

III. Sampling Standard Adopted in This Book

In summary, when an engagement lasts only one or two rounds, the original text generally states “one or two rounds” directly. Therefore, the logical range of “several rounds” must begin at three and end at ten. To ensure consistency in combat-prowess calculations, this book adopts the following standard conversion for the term “several rounds.”

Logical Range: 3–10 rounds

Minimum Value: 3 rounds

Maximum Value: 10 rounds

【Standard Sampling Value】 : Based on the weighted average of the minimum and maximum values, the standard value is set at 7 rounds—the default value for “several rounds.”



Section Nine: Converting “Half a Day” into Time and Combat Rounds

I. Analysis of the Conflict Between Literal Meaning and Context

The term “banxiang” has two possible literal interpretations. One refers to “half a day,” approximately six hours; the other refers to “a short while,” meaning a brief period of time. Applying either interpretation directly to duels between warriors creates logical contradictions.

【1】 Scenario: The Death of Dian Wei (Static Intimidation)

●→ **Original Text:** 【Dian Wei’s wounds burst open, and blood flowed across the ground as he died. Even after he had been dead for a banxiang, not a single person dared enter through the front gate.】

☉→ **Reconstruction:** If “banxiang” is interpreted as “half a day”—six hours—then the corpse would have long since stiffened, yet no one would still dare enter. Although this demonstrates Dian Wei’s intimidating might, it appears excessively prolonged and exaggerated within the pace of a siege. If it is interpreted merely as “a short while,” however, it fails to convey the extreme fear that Cao Cao’s troops felt toward Dian Wei.

【2】 Scenario: Xu Chu Fighting Two Opponents Alone (Dynamic Combat)

●→ **Original Text:** 【Xu Chu fought the two generals—Zhou Tai and Han Dang—for a banxiang before finally withdrawing.】

☉→ **Assuming “Half a Day” :** Six hours of high-intensity combat would equal approximately 240 rounds. If Xu Chu fought two Jiangdong generals alone for that long without a decisive outcome, then:

“Super-Elite-Tier Xu Chu $\approx$ Zhou Tai + Han Dang.”

☉→ **Assuming “A Short While” :** If the battle lasted only several dozen minutes, it would fail to convey the temporal significance of the phrase “before finally withdrawing.”

II. Quantitative Standard Adopted in This Book

In summary, “banxiang” in Romance of the Three Kingdoms is not an absolute unit of physical time, but rather a “sustained duration with a perceptible sense of intensity.” Adopting the maximum interpretation—half a day—would be excessively implausible, while adopting the minimum interpretation—a brief moment—would lack sufficient dramatic weight. This book therefore applies a “weighted compromise method,” defining “banxiang” as a medium-to-long-duration battle sufficient to consume most of a warrior’s stamina.

Standard Conversion Formula

●→**Time Definition:** Approximately 2.5 hours—between half a day and a brief moment.

●→**Round Conversion:** Set at 100 rounds.

●→**Conclusion:** Whenever the text states that a warrior “fought for a banxiang,” it is treated as a high-intensity engagement lasting approximately 100 rounds.

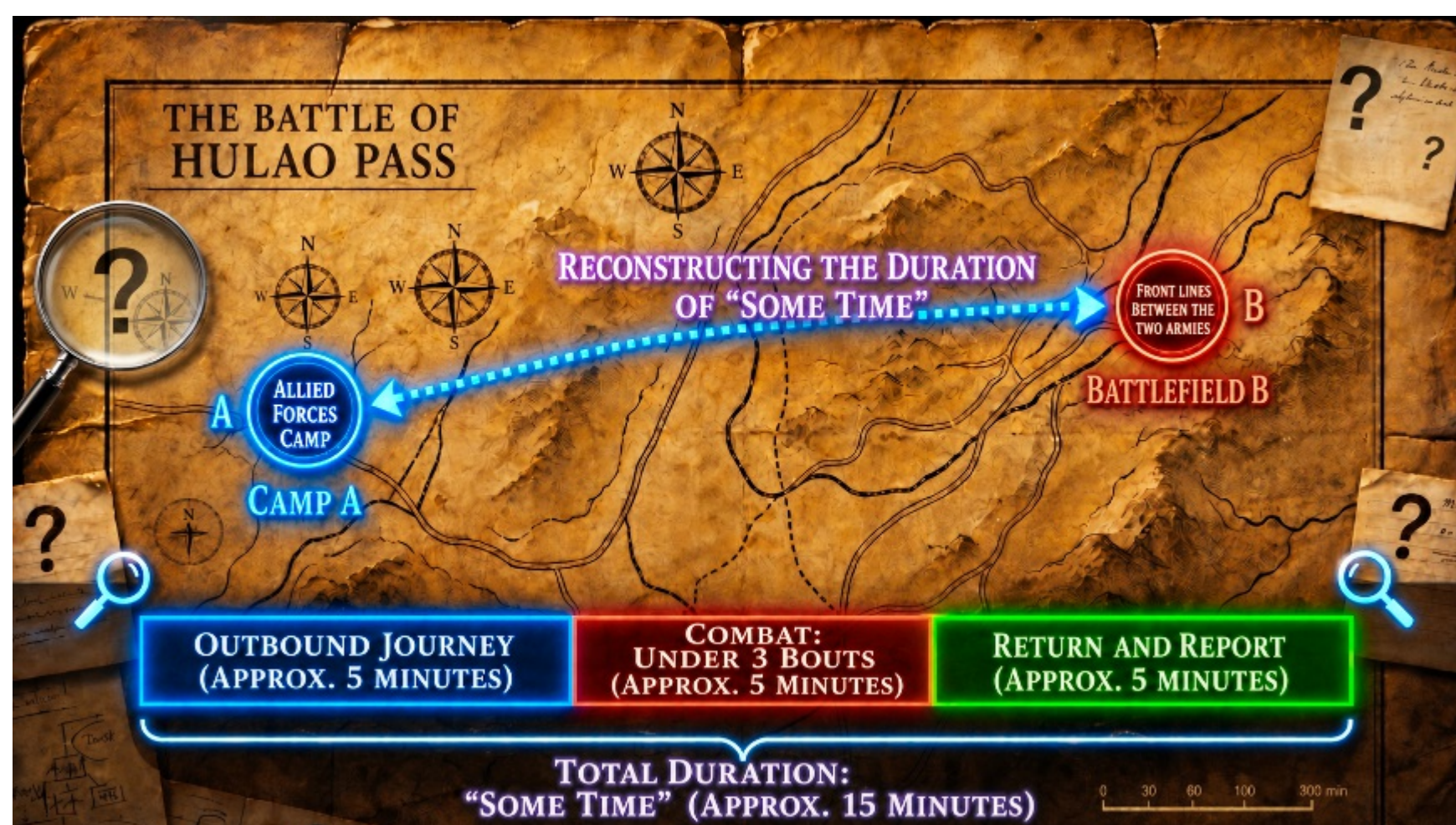


Xu Chu fought Zhou Tai and Han Dang together for approximately 100 rounds—two and a half hours—without a decisive outcome.

Section Ten: Quantifying “For a Long Time” and Reconstructing the Battle of the Three Heroes Against Lu Bu

The Battle of the Three Heroes Against Lu Bu is one of the classic climactic episodes in Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The original text describes Lu Bu, under the combined assault of all three warriors, as being “unable to hold them off and galloping back to his formation.” But exactly how many rounds did Lu Bu withstand? The original laudatory verse merely states: 【The three surrounded him and fought for a long time.】

To reconstruct the actual course of the Battle of Hulao Pass, this book must first quantify “for a long time” into a precise number of rounds.



【Core Visual Logic: The Physical Breakdown of “For a Long Time” —YuShe’s Spatiotemporal Formula】

【1】 Composition of “For a Long Time” : See Battle Case 22, the crucial original-text account of Hua Xiong vs. Yu She. Through a microscopic analysis of “Yu She’s death,” this diagram overturns the mistaken impression that “for a long time” in a duel necessarily means that the two warriors fought for an extended period. In the original text, “for a long time” encompasses three separate temporal processes: “leaving the camp to investigate → engaging the enemy in a duel → reporting the battle situation.” It does not refer solely to the duration of the duel itself.

【2】 Three-Part Structure

●→ **Blue and Green Zones (Outbound and Return Journeys):** The physical travel time between the main camp and the battlefield, approximately five minutes each way.

●→ **Red Zone (Combat):** The central engagement zone. Yu She held out for only “less than three rounds,” equivalent to merely about five minutes.

●→ **Conclusion:** The total duration represented by “for a long time” was only approximately fifteen minutes, corresponding to roughly ten rounds. It was by no means a prolonged battle lasting one hundred rounds or more.

【3】 **Investigation of “For a Long Time” in Single Combat:** Of the only two instances in the entire book where “for a long time” is used specifically for a duel, Yu She’s case in Battle Case 22 provides the key to solving the mystery of how many rounds Lu Bu fought against the Three Heroes “for a long time.”

I. Textual Research: Defining “For a Long Time” Through the Death of Yu She

【1】 The Unrefined Ye Edition and Yu Edition

●→ **Original Text:** 【Yu She was then ordered to ride out. After a long time, a report came: Yu She had fought Hua Xiong for less than three rounds and had been slain by him.】

(Ye Edition and Yu Edition)

☉→ **Analysis:** The author believes that both editions preserve Luo Guanzhong’s original meaning of “for a long time.” Here, the phrase clearly includes the physical time required for the outbound and return journeys. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain why a battle lasting “less than three rounds”—only about five minutes—would take “a long time.”

【2】 The Refined Jiajing Edition and Mao Edition

●→ **Original Text:** 【Yu She was then ordered to ride out. A report immediately came that Yu She had fought Hua Xiong for less than three rounds and had been slain by him.】

(Jiajing Edition and Mao Edition)

☉→ **Analysis:** This constitutes a major act of tampering with the original text! The reviser, Jiang Daqi, evidently realized that Yu She’s “for a long time” would also puncture the inflated claim surrounding Lu Bu’s “for a long time.” To preserve Lu Bu’s image as an invincible god of war, he deliberately changed “for a long time” to “immediately,” attempting to seal this loophole in the combat-prowess logic. His revision was so influential that even the Mao Edition copied

“immediately” verbatim.

【3】 Conclusion of the Textual Research

By adopting the Ye Edition and Yu Edition as the basis for combat-prowess analysis, this book directly exposes the blind spot of the Jiajing Edition and Mao Edition. Jiang Daqi deliberately misled later generations of readers, with the result that even six centuries after the formation of the novel, many combat-prowess commentators still mistakenly regard Lu Bu as the strongest warrior.

The devilish detail of 【for a long time】 in Battle Case 22 survives only in the Ye Edition and Yu Edition.

●→ Reconstruction of the Time Components

☉→ **Outbound Journey:** Yu She rode from the allied camp to the battlefield—estimated at approximately five minutes.

☉→ **Combat:** “Less than three rounds,” treated as approximately three rounds—estimated at approximately five minutes.

☉→ **Return and Report:** A scout ran from the battlefield back to the allied camp to deliver the report—estimated at approximately five minutes.

☉→ **Quantitative Conclusion:** Outbound Journey (5 min) + Combat (5 min) + Return and Report (5 min) = Approximately 15 Minutes = 【For a Long Time】

II. Battle Reconstruction: How Many Rounds Did Lu Bu Last Against the Combined Assault of the Three Heroes?

If the “Yu She Formula” defined above—“for a long time $\approx$ fifteen minutes”—is applied to the Battle of the Three Heroes Against Lu Bu:

【1】 **Time Conversion:** Fifteen minutes of whirling, high-intensity combat.

【2】 **Round Conversion:** After all three heroes joined the attack, Lu Bu held out for only about fifteen minutes—approximately ten rounds, and certainly no more than thirty rounds—before being defeated and fleeing.

【3】 **Conclusive Logical Evidence:** Had Lu Bu truly been capable of withstanding the combined assault of the Three Heroes for fifty rounds or more, Luo Guanzhong, following his usual writing practice—such as explicitly recording Lu Bu’s fifty-round draw against Zhang Fei—would never have omitted the number of rounds. The absence of a specific number is precisely because ten rounds would have appeared too unimpressive if stated directly. The laudatory verse therefore merely glossed over it with the phrase “for a long time,” a flattering euphemism intended to preserve some dignity for Lu Bu.

III. Verifying the Accuracy of the Ten-Round Estimate: Overwhelming Suppression at 2.3 Times the Combat Strength

Why could Lu Bu last for only ten rounds? This can be logically verified through “combat-prowess positioning.”

[1] Zhang Fei $\approx$ 1 Lu Bu: Supported by Luo Guanzhong’s direct authorial judgment—【After fierce combat, neither could decide victory or defeat】 in the Hulao Pass laudatory verse—and by the actual battle evidence that Zhang Fei could fight Lu Bu evenly for two hundred rounds, as established in Section Three: The Core Super-Elite Group. The two are therefore judged to be approximately equal in strength.

[2] Guan Yu $\approx$ 1 Lu Bu: At Hulao Pass, Guan Yu “slew the stronger Hua Xiong in one round,” a performance superior to Lu Bu’s failure to kill the weaker Gongsun Zan within two rounds. Even under a conservative assessment, Guan Yu’s combat prowess is treated here as approximately equal to Lu Bu’s.

[3] Liu Bei $\approx$ 0.3 Lu Bu: Although Liu Bei’s combat prowess was comparatively weaker, he still served as the final straw that broke the camel’s back and provided crucial interference.

[4] Combined Combat Effectiveness: This can be understood numerically as 1 vs. 2.3. Lu Bu was facing the equivalent of 2.3 Lu BUs—the Three Heroes—and was therefore at an absolute disadvantage.

IV. The Ten-Round Performance Simply Does Not Carry Enough Weight

According to Section Three:

Xu Chu (200 rounds) = Lu Bu (200 rounds)

If Xu Chu—who could fight Lu Bu evenly for two hundred rounds—were placed against the Three Heroes instead, there is no reason to assume that his performance would necessarily be worse than Lu Bu’s merely because he resisted for only ten rounds before being defeated and fleeing.

Therefore, a defeat lasting only ten rounds in the Battle of the Three Heroes Against Lu Bu can hardly prove that Lu Bu possessed absolute dominance capable of “overwhelming all other heroes.” Nor is it sufficient to serve as ironclad evidence that he was the strongest warrior in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

To repeat the same old point: Lu Bu would need two hundred rounds just to fight Xu Chu to a draw. What is there to boast about in his defeat against the Three Heroes?

A 2.3-Fold Disparity in Combat Prowess: Lu Bu Was Destined to Last No More Than Twenty Rounds



💀 One Lu Bu < 2.3 Lu Bus 👑

[Core Visual Logic: The Mathematical Inevitability of the Three Heroes' Encirclement Hunt]

[1] Desperation Coefficient (1 : 2.3)

The chart visually demonstrates the disparity in strength at the Battle of Hulao Pass. Although Lu Bu on the left was powerful (coefficient 1.0), the right side combined the output of Zhang Fei (1.0) + Guan Yu (1.0) + Liu Bei (0.3), producing a total combat effectiveness as high as 2.3 times. This was not a duel, but a one-sided "slaughter."

[2] Logical Lock-In (The Xiaopei Hundred-Round Battle)

If Lu Bu had truly been able to fight one against three against 230% firepower for as long as "half a day," then at Xiaopei he should have been able to defeat Zhang Fei with ease, rather than merely fighting him to a one-hundred-round draw and then hiding behind his lines, never again coming out to settle the matter in single combat. Therefore, the number of rounds implied by "for a long time" cannot possibly have been large.

【3】 Xu Chu as the Lock (The Two-Hundred-Round Battle)

If Lu Bu had truly been able to fight one against three against 230% firepower for as long as “half a day,” then he should not have been unable to defeat Xu Chu even after two hundred rounds. He ought to have crushed Xu Chu within twenty rounds. This indirectly confirms that the number of rounds implied by “for a long time” cannot possibly have been large.

【4】 Countdown to Collapse (00:15:00)

The central timer is locked at “15 minutes.” This corresponds to the concept of “for a long time” derived above, which converts into approximately ten rounds of actual combat. It represents Lu Bu’s “physical limit” under the burden of overloaded defense.

【5】 Conclusion

Flight in defeat was a mathematical inevitability. When the defensive side is forced to withstand attack pressure at 2.3 times its own level, any line of defense will collapse within a short period of time. A standoff lasting more than fifty rounds—more than one hour—simply cannot exist under such conditions. Lu Bu’s “galloping back to his formation” was, in reality, the precise execution of battlefield survival instinct.

【6】 Note: The Dual Meaning in Dictionary Definitions

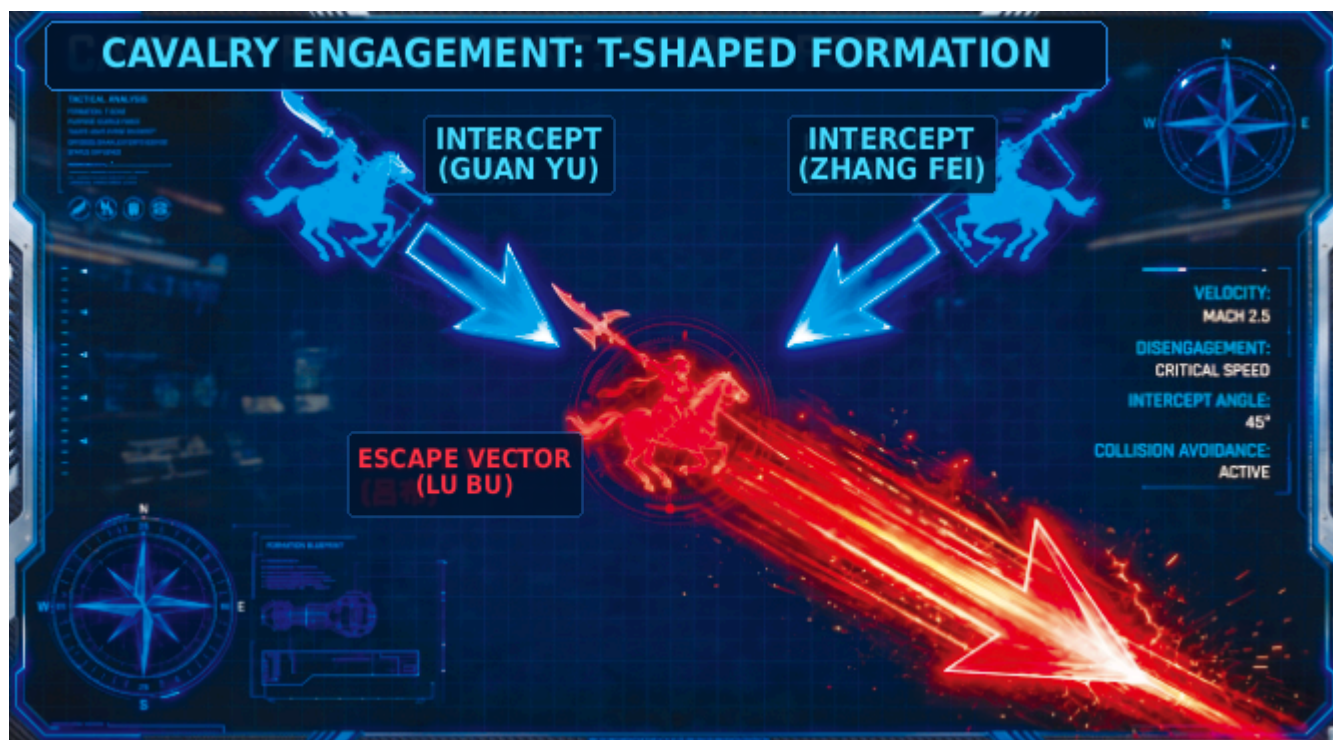
●→ Regarding the possible misconception that “for a long time” must mean “half a day” : in fact, standard dictionaries—such as the Ministry of Education’s Revised Chinese Dictionary—define “for a long time” with two meanings: it may mean “for quite a long while,” or it may also mean “for a fair little while” (a brief span).

☉→ Under the extreme suppression of 1 vs. 2.3, if one forcibly interprets it as “for quite a long while” (several hours), that would violate the mathematical common sense that $2.3 \gg 1$. Therefore, this book adopts the latter meaning (a brief span): although those fifteen minutes may have felt “like a very long time” to Lu Bu himself, with every second dragging like a year, in objective time they were merely “a fair little while”—the brief interval of his combat collapse.

☉→ Through the round-based concept of “for a long time,” we can deduce:

Lu Bu $\approx$ 30 Yu Shes (YS) $\approx$ Guan Yu $\approx$ Zhang Fei

Section Eleven: The Truth Behind “Could Not Defeat Him” and the Mystery of the T-Shaped Battle Formation



【Core Visual Logic: The Thirty-Round T-Shaped Engagement—A Vector Diagram of Limit Escape】

This diagram reveals the physical and geometric truth behind “the Two Heroes battling Lu Bu for thirty rounds”: it was a high-pressure engagement of suppression and extreme escape, one with a strong element of pursuit and attempted killing.

【1】 The Blue Side (Guan Yu and Zhang Fei): A Pincer Suppression of 60 YS (The Pincer Intercept)

●→ **Combat-Prowess Equivalent:** The blue vector arrows on the left and right represent the combined combat strength of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, reaching a total of 60 YS.

⊙→ **Tactical Intent:** The two arrows converge inward, aiming to compress Lu Bu’s room for movement completely. This was not merely an addition of combat values, but an absolute crushing force in physical terms as well. As the formula proves: Guan Yu (1) + Zhang Fei (1) $\gg$ Lu Bu (1). Faced with double the equivalent force, if Lu Bu had chosen to stand his ground and resist head-on, it would have been no different from seeking death.

【2】 The Red Side (Lu Bu): The Kinetic Conversion and Extreme Breakout of 30 YS (The Escape Vector)

●→ **Strategic Shift:** The red unit in the center is Lu Bu. Faced with a strangling formation twice as strong as himself, Lu Bu made the only correct battlefield decision—he converted all of his “combat power” into “escape momentum.”

●→ **The Red Hare Engine (Mach 2.5):** The great red beam and trailing streak in the diagram concretely visualize the absolute mobility advantage provided by the Red Hare horse. Lu Bu decisively abandoned direct confrontation and instead chose a backward-direction “guerrilla-style evasive fight.”

[3] Conclusion: The Cruel Inequality of Survival

Based on the absolute combat gap of $60 \text{ YS} > 30 \text{ YS}$, Lu Bu's battle mode switched to “escape as the primary strategy, defensive parrying as the secondary one.”

What later generations call “Lu Bu could not be brought down,” and use to argue that Lu Bu was stronger than either Guan Yu or Zhang Fei individually, was in fact simply the result of Lu Bu accurately using the speed of the Red Hare horse, at the very last second before Guan Yu and Zhang Fei's pincer assault fully closed, to burst through the escape opening in the “T-shaped” formation.

[4] Note: The Qualitative Change in the Battle Once Guan Yu Entered

●→ As derived earlier from “Zhang Fei (1) = Lu Bu (1),” the moment Yunchang entered the fight with blade in hand, the balance of combat power instantly tilted into “Guan Yu + Zhang Fei $>$ Lu Bu.” Consider the original text:

【Yunchang spurred his horse, brandished the eighty-two-jin Green Dragon Blade, and came to fight Lu Bu. The three horses battled in a T-shaped formation. They fought for another thirty rounds.】

◎→ **The cruel truth behind this passage is that from the very moment Guan Yu entered the battle,** Lu Bu had already been forced to activate his escape mechanism—the “T-shaped kill.” The so-called 【T-shaped battle】 was, in reality, Lu Bu under the pincer attack of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, not even daring to remain stationary for a single round of direct weapon-to-weapon resistance. He could only rely on the speed of his horse to maneuver and circle, fighting while fleeing for thirty rounds—a “thirty rounds” figure with enormous inflation built into it.

◎→ **As explained in the previous section,** when facing the combined assault of the Three Heroes, Lu Bu could not last even ten rounds, because once trapped in the encirclement he had no room to employ the “T-shaped kill” guerrilla tactic. Looking back at this battle, the supposed weight and value of Lu Bu's “T-shaped kill” was in fact heavily watered down: in actual direct engagement, he could not even withstand the joint force of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei for a single round. He relied purely on the divine speed and leg power of the Red Hare horse to forcibly stretch the encounter into a thirty-round pursuit-and-escape formation.

I. The “T-Shaped Engagement”: Stalemate or Pursuit?

The phrase “battled in a T-shaped formation” in the original text actually reveals the dynamic trajectory of the engagement. Had Lu Bu truly been capable of confronting the two generals head-on, the formation should have resembled the Chinese character “品,” indicating a triangular stalemate. Instead, the dynamic structure of the Chinese character “丁”—a T shape—often represents pursuit in terms of military dynamics.

【1】 Lu Bu’s Hit-and-Run Tactics

●→ **Horizontal Interception (Guan Yu and Zhang Fei):** Forms the horizontal stroke of the “T.” The two warriors fought side by side or attacked from both sides, creating a broad frontal zone of pressure.

◎→ **Vertical Escape Vector (Lu Bu):** Forms the vertical stem of the “T.” This was not an offensive route, but the “retreat vector” created by Lu Bu as he exploited the speed advantage of the Red Hare horse while under the combined assault of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

【2】 Conclusion

The “T-shaped engagement” was not a stationary battle in which Lu Bu stood his ground and continuously attacked. It was a form of “defensive maneuver warfare”—hit and run. From the moment Guan Yu entered the battlefield, Lu Bu had already switched into the escape-oriented “T-shaped” mode.

II. Logical Deduction of Combat Strength: The Absolute Disadvantage of 1 vs. 2

The preceding section has already established that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were each approximately equal to Lu Bu in combat prowess.

【1】 **Combat-Strength Formula:** Guan Yu (1) + Zhang Fei (1) > Lu Bu (1)

【2】 **Battle Analysis:** Under the absolute premise that $2 > 1$, Lu Bu alone could not possibly defeat opponents possessing twice his combat strength in a head-on confrontation. The only reasons he managed to hold out for thirty rounds were the exceptional speed of the Red Hare horse and the advantages afforded by hit-and-run tactics.

【3】 If the Battle Became a Stationary Engagement (Standing His Ground and Fighting Head-On)

Had Lu Bu abandoned his mobile tactics and remained in place to trade blows directly with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, calculations based on the relative weighting of their combat strength indicate that he would likely have collapsed within fifteen to twenty rounds—an estimate derived by working backward from the fact that the

Three Heroes defeated him in only ten rounds. He might even have been slain on the battlefield.

III. “Could Not Bring Him Down” : Luo Guanzhong’s Rhetorical Ambiguity

The three Chinese characters meaning “could not bring him down” are highly deceptive as literary phrasing. They can easily lead readers to mistake the situation for a draw, when in reality they mean only that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were unable to complete the kill within a short period of time.

【1】 Tactical Level

Lu Bu’s approach was “escape first, fight second.” Although Guan Yu and Zhang Fei held every advantage, converting “defeat” into “killing” required more time when facing an opponent intent on fleeing and mounted on a top-tier warhorse.

【2】 Narrative Level (Key Evidence)

At this moment, Liu Bei thought:

【Liu Xuande watched and thought to himself: If I do not strike now, what am I waiting for?】

This sentence proves that, in Liu Bei’s eyes, the battle situation was not “Lu Bu is incredibly strong,” but rather “Lu Bu is already showing signs of defeat—this is the perfect opportunity to finish him off.” Had Lu Bu truly been fighting with ease, would Liu Bei not have been charging forward to his death? It was precisely because Lu Bu had already been driven into a desperate position by the Two Heroes that Liu Bei dared to join the battle as the final straw that broke the camel’s back.

【3】 The Truth Behind the Thirty Rounds

Liu Bei’s composed reaction in drawing his swords and joining the fight itself proves that, throughout those thirty rounds, Lu Bu had already been suppressed and forced into a disadvantage by the combined assault of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. It was by no means the “thirty-round draw” proclaimed by pro-Lu Bu commentators.

IV. Liu Bei—the “Fig Leaf” Concealing the Flying General’s “Could Not Be Brought Down”

In summary, “could not bring him down” was not a medal proving Lu Bu’s combat prowess, but evidence of his ability to escape. Luo Guanzhong arranged for Lu Bu to endure thirty rounds of pressure not to prove that he was stronger than either of the Two Heroes individually, but as a strategic compromise in the structure of the narrative—Lu Bu had to remain on the battlefield long enough for Liu Xuande to make his climactic entrance. Had Guan Yu and Zhang Fei driven