

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 45.

Last time, Liu Bei scored a big victory over a couple of Cao Cao's officers, thanks to his new military strategist, Dan (1) Fu (2). Cao Cao, however, soon found out that Dan (1) Fu's (2) real name was Xu (2) Shu (4). Cao Cao wanted to take Xu Shu away from Liu Bei, so he had Xu Shu's mother detained, and one of his advisers forged a letter from her to Xu Shu, summoning her son to the capital Xuchang.

When Xu Shu got this letter and learned that his mom had been detained, he quickly went to Liu Bei and wept and said, "My real name is Xu Shu. I assumed the name Dan Fu when I was on the lam. Previously, I heard Liu Biao was recruiting talented men, so I went to see him. But upon speaking with him, I recognized he was useless. So I wrote him a note and left. That night, I went to see Master Water Mirror and told him what happened. He lectured me about not finding a worthy master and told me that I should serve you. That's why I dared to sing on the streets to catch your attention. Fortunately I received your favor and was entrusted with important responsibilities.

"Unfortunately, my elderly mother has been detained by Cao Cao, and he means to do her harm. She has written to summon me, and I must go. It's not that I don't want to do everything I can to help you, but I must try to save my mother. So I have to take my leave of you now. Perhaps we will meet again in the future."

When Liu Bei heard this, he cried bitterly and said to Xu Shu, "The bond between mother and son is forged by heaven. You must not concern yourself with me. With luck, perhaps I will be able to receive your counsel once more after you reunite with your mother."

Xu Shu bowed to thank Liu Bei and wanted to set out at once for Xuchang. But Liu Bei said, "Let us have one more night together; you can leave tomorrow morning." And Xu Shu agreed.

After Xu Shu walked out, one of Liu Bei's advisers, Sun Qian (2), came to see Liu Bei in private.

"Xu Shu is a rare talent," Sun Qian said. "Besides, he has been with us in Xinye (1,3) County for a while now and knows all of our military secrets. If he is allowed to go to Cao Cao, Cao Cao would surely make use of him, and we would be in danger. My lord, you should beg him to stay; do not let him leave. When he fails to show up in Xuchang, Cao Cao would surely execute his mother. When Xu Shu hears that his mother has been killed, he would no doubt do everything he can to help us, so as to seek revenge against Cao Cao."

"Never!" Liu Bei said. "It is inhumane to kill a man's mother so that I can retain her son's service. It is dishonorable to keep him here and prevent him from fulfilling his filial duties. I would rather die than to do such an inhumane and dishonorable thing."

When his staff heard this, they could not help but be touched by Liu Bei's compassion and honor.

That night, Liu Bei invited Xu Shu to share wine with him, but it was a rather melancholy get-together.

"Knowing that my mother has been imprisoned, I would not be able to swallow even ambrosia," Xu Shu lamented.

Well, Liu Bei tried to out-melancholy him.

"When I heard you were leaving, I felt like I was losing one of my hands," he said. "Even if I were eating dragon or phoenix, I can find no pleasure."

And so it went for the rest of the night, as the two of them sat facing each other with tears streaming until dawn. Liu Bei's staff had gathered outside the city and set up a going-away banquet to see Xu Shu off. Liu Bei and Xu Shu rode out of the city side by side and traveled together for a few miles before they dismounted to bid each other goodbye.

Liu Bei raised a cup to Xu Shu and said, "My meager lot in life and my paltry destiny prevent us from remaining together. I hope you will serve your new master well and make a name for yourself."

Xu Shu wept and replied, "Though I am untalented and unknowledgeable, I had the good fortune to be entrusted by your lordship with grave responsibilities. Unfortunately, I must leave you before our task is done, all on account of my mother. Even if Cao Cao tries to force me to serve him, I swear I will never offer a single idea to him as long as I am alive."

"Once you are gone, I plan to withdraw to the mountains," Liu Bei said.

"When I drew up grand designs with your lordship, my meager intellect was all I had to go on," Xu Shu said. "Now, with my mother in peril, I cannot think clearly, so even if I stay, I would be of no use to you. Your lordship should seek out some other great talent to help you achieve success. You must not lose heart like this."

"No man in this world can surpass your talent," Liu Bei said.

"How can my useless, commonplace skills warrant such high praise?" Xu Shu said.

Then, as he was about to go, Xu Shu turned to Liu Bei's staff and said, "Good sirs, I hope you will serve his lordship well so that your names and deeds will be known for all eternity. Do not follow my example of failing to finish what I began."

Oh great, so now EVERYBODY was sad. Liu Bei still could not bear to say goodbye, so he accompanied Xu Shu farther and farther, until finally Xu Shu said, "Your lordship need not go so far to see me off. I will take my leave of you here."

Liu Bei took his hand and said, "Sir, once you go, we will be in different corners of the world. Who knows when we will meet again!" And then his tears fell like rain.

After Xu Shu bid him a teary goodbye, Liu Bei sat on his horse and watched from behind as Xu Shu and his attendant rode off into the distance.

"He is gone," Liu Bei wept. "What should I do now?"

As he wiped away his tears and looked up again, he found his line of sight blocked by a stretch of forest, and he could not see Xu Shu anymore.

“I am going to cut down those woods,” Liu Bei said as he pointed at the trees. When his men asked him why, he said, “Because they blocked my view of Xu Shu.”

Just then, they suddenly saw Xu Shu galloping back toward them.

“He’s coming back! Did he change his mind?!” Liu Bei said with surprise.

So he rode out to meet Xu Shu and said, “You must have a good reason for coming back.”

Xu Shu held up his horse and replied, “In my distracted state of mind, I forgot to tell you something. There is an extraordinary man in these parts. He lives only about seven miles outside the city of Xiangyang (1,2), in the area of Longzhong (2,1). Your lordship should seek him out.”

“Dare I trouble you to go invite him to come meet me?” Liu Bei asked.

“You cannot ask this man to come meet you; you must go seek him in person,” Xu Shu said. “If you can get him to help you, it would be no less than the Zhou getting Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2) or the Han getting Zhang (1) Liang (2).”

Now both of those guys that Xu Shu just referenced were legendary strategists who helped found the two greatest dynasties in Chinese history up till this point in time. So this was an eyebrow-raising comparison.

“How does this man’s talent compare to yours?” Liu Bei asked.

“Comparing me to him is like comparing a pitiful horse to a qilin or a crow to a phoenix,” Xu Shu said. And a side note here: A qilin is a mythical creature in Asian culture that is deemed to be a great omen.

“This man,” Xu Shu continued, “often compares himself to great advisers Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4) from antiquity. But in my opinion, even those two cannot compare to him. He is perhaps the only man in the empire who has the talent to plot the course of heaven and earth!”

“What is his name?” an excited Liu Bei asked.

“His last name is Zhuge (1,2), and his first name is Liang (4). He is a descendant of Zhuge Feng (1), the former commander of the Capital Districts. His father was a governor’s deputy in the Taishan (4,1) district, but he died when Zhuge Liang was still young, so Zhuge Liang went to live with his uncle. His uncle was an old acquaintance of Liu Biao’s, so they moved to Xiangyang (1,2). After his uncle died, Zhuge Liang and his younger brother took to farming in the area of Nanyang (2,2). There is a stretch of hills near their home called Sleeping Dragon Ridge, so he dubbed himself Master Sleeping Dragon. He is simply extraordinary. You must go see him in person as soon as you can. If you can get him to help you, you will not need to worry about restoring peace to the realm.”

And now, Liu Bei put one and one together.

“Master Water Mirror told me that ‘Of Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix, if you can get one of them, you can restore order to the land.’ Is he this Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix?”

“Young Phoenix is Pang (2) Tong (3), who lives in Xiangyang (1,2),” Xu Shu said. “Sleeping Dragon is none other than Zhuge Liang.”

“Now I finally understand!” Liu Bei leaped up and cried. “Who knew that such talent is right in front of me?! If not for you, I would still be blind.”

Now, if you are in any way familiar with the novel or the video games it inspired, then you probably have some idea that this Zhuge Liang is a fairly important character. If you have not heard of him, let’s just say that he basically is THE reason this novel is called Romance of the THREE Kingdoms, rather than something like Romance of the Splintered Han Empire That Soon Became the Kingdom of

Cao Cao. So it was awfully nice of Xu Shu to remember to turn around and tell Liu Bei about this guy.

In fact, this scene merited its own poem:

To part for aye made Liu Bei sore with grief.

At road's fork they stopped, in each emotions deep.

A word is dropped, like thunder's boom in spring,

Rousing the sleeping dragon from Nanyang (2,2).

His ringing endorsement of Zhuge Liang done, Xu Shu once again took his leave of Liu Bei and rode away for real this time. As for Liu Bei, he was no longer thinking about deforestation. Instead, he felt like he had just awoken from a dream, now that he finally understood what Master Water Mirror had told him. He led his staff back to Xinye and began preparations to go seek out Zhuge Liang.

But Xu Shu still was not quite ready to head off to Xuchang yet. Reminiscing about Liu Bei, he began to worry that Zhuge Liang might not be willing to help him, so before he hit the road to the capital, he stopped off at Zhuge Liang's thatched hut. When Zhuge Liang asked him what he was doing there, Xu Shu said, "I was serving Lord Liu, but my mother has been detained by Cao Cao and wrote me a letter summoning me to her, so I have no choice but to go. Before I left, I recommended you to Liu Bei. He will come to call on you very soon. I hope you will not refuse his request and that you will use all your knowledge to help him. It would be a great thing!"

Zhuge Liang, however, apparently did not think it was such a great thing. He said with annoyance, "Sir, do you mean to offer me up as a sacrifice?" He then waved his sleeve and retired to his quarters. Xu Shu, thoroughly embarrassed, had no choice but to resume his journey to Xuchang.

As soon as Cao Cao heard that Xu Shu had arrived in the capital, he ordered his team of advisers, led by Xun (2) Yu (4) and Cheng (2) Yu (4), to go welcome him. Xu Shu went to the prime minister's residence to see Cao Cao.

"Sir, you are a learned scholar," Cao Cao said to him. "Why did you subjugate yourself to the service of Liu Bei?"

"I've been on the run since I was young," Xu Shu said. "I chanced upon Xinye County, where I became good friends with Liu Bei. But since my mother is now here and in your generous care, I am overcome with both shame and gratitude."

"Well, now that you are here, you can tend to your mother, and I get the benefit of your counsel," Cao Cao said. Of course, he did not get the memo that Xu Shu had sworn to never offer him an idea.

Xu Shu thanked Cao Cao and took his leave. He then hurried over to see his mother and prostrated on the ground while crying. His mother was stunned to see her son.

"What are you doing here?!" she asked.

"I have been serving Lord Liu in Xinye recently. But when I received your letter, I rushed here."

When she heard this, Xu Shu's mother became enraged. She slapped the table and scolded him.

"Disgraceful child! With all the years you have spent drifting around, I thought you would have become more knowledgeable. But you have actually gotten dumber! You've read the classics. You should know that loyalty and filial piety cannot coexist! How can you fail to recognize Cao Cao for what he is -- a traitor who oppresses his lord?! Liu Bei is renowned for his humanity and honor, and he is also a member of the imperial house. He is truly a worthy master for you. But now, with one fake letter and without investigating further, you have forsaken the light for the darkness and earned yourself a bad reputation. YOU ... ARE ... AN ... IDIOT! I am too ashamed to see you! You have disgraced your ancestors! You have lived for nothing!"

Wow, so that's quite a tongue-lashing there, and Xu Shu was so ashamed that he could only remain prostrated on the ground and dared not look up at his mother. After delivering her searing lecture, Xu Shu's mother went back behind the privacy screen and to her room. Moments later, an attendant rushed out and told Xu Shu, "Your mother has hanged herself on the cross beam of the house!"

Xu Shu hurried in to save her, but by the time he got her down, the old lady was gone. Later, someone would pen a poem in praise of her:

Mother Xu's integrity
Will savor for eternity.
She kept her honor free of stain,
A credit to her family's name.
A model lesson for her son,
No grief or hardship would she shun.
An aura like a sacred hill,
Allegiance sprung from depth of will.
For Liu Bei, words of approbation.
For Cao Cao, utter condemnation.
Boiling oil or scalding water,
Knife or axe could not deter her.
Then, lest Xu Shu shame his forebears,
She joined the ranks of martyred mothers.
In life, her proper designation;
In death, her proper destination.

Mother Xu's integrity

Will savor for eternity.

Xu Shu now wept so bitterly that he fainted on the floor and did not come to for a long while. When Cao Cao heard the news, he sent people to deliver mourning gifts and convey his condolences. He also personally went to pay respects to Mother Xu's altar. Xu Shu buried his mother on the plains south of the capital and performed his mourning duties by guarding the grave site. He also said thanks but no thanks to everything that Cao Cao sent. So yeah, Cao Cao can forget about EVER getting any help from Xu Shu.

But no matter. At least Xu Shu was no longer serving Liu Bei. So now, Cao Cao resumed discussion of waging a campaign to conquer the south, but Xun Yu advised him to wait out the bitter cold of winter and wait until the spring thaw to march. Cao Cao agreed, but he did not allow the army to sit idle. Instead, he redirected the Zhang (1) River to create a lake for naval training, which his soldiers will need when they have to wage war on the Yangzi (2,3) River that serves as the natural defense barrier for the south.

This postponement of Cao Cao's southern campaign meant Liu Bei had some free time over the winter, which was good because he was preparing to go see Zhuge Liang. Just as he was getting his gifts ready, his attendants reported that an unusual-looking Daoist wearing a tall hat and broad sash had arrived.

"Could that be Zhuge Liang?" Liu Bei wondered. So he tidied up his outfit and went to greet the visitor. Well, it was not Zhuge Liang. Instead, it was Sima Hui (1), Master Water Mirror. Liu Bei was happy to see him and welcomed him into the private quarters.

“Ever since I took my leave of your saintly presence, I have been beset by military matters and thus neglected to pay you a visit,” Liu Bei said. “I am so glad you are here.”

“I heard Xu Shu is serving you now, so I came to see him,” Master Water Mirror said.

“Recently, Cao Cao detained his mother, and she wrote him a letter summoning him to the capital, so he left,” Liu Bei said.

“He has fallen for Cao Cao’s deception!” Water Mirror said. “I have often heard about Mother Xu’s integrity. Even if she has been detained by Cao Cao, she would not write to summon her son. That letter must have been faked. If Xu Shu did not go to the capital, then his mother would still be alive. But now that he has gone there, she will be dead for sure!”

Liu Bei was taken aback by this and asked why.

“Mother Xu has always lived according to the highest principles,” Water Mirror explained. “She would no doubt be too ashamed to see her son.”

Well, there was not much Liu Bei could do about that now, so he changed the topic of conversation and said, “Before he left, Xu Shu recommended Zhuge Liang of Nanyang (2,2). What do you think of him?”

“If Xu Shu wants to go, then go. Why must he drag Zhuge Liang into this?” Water Mirror said with a smile.

“Why do you say that?” Liu Bei asked.

“Zhuge Liang is close friends with Xu Shu and three other learned scholars,” Water Mirror said. “His four friends dedicated themselves to esoteric rituals of spiritual refinement, but Zhuge Liang was the only one who contemplated the doctrine in its entirety. Once, while sitting and chanting invocations, he said to the other four, ‘Any one of you could advance to the rank of inspector or governor if you enter government service.’ But when they asked him what he aspired to, Zhuge Liang

merely smiled and did not answer. He also often compares himself to the great advisers Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4). From these things, you can see that his talent cannot be measured.”

“Wow, how has this area produced so many great talents?” Liu Bei wondered.

“Long ago, a skilled astrologist remarked that the stars are clustered above this region, which is why there are so many talented men here,” Water Mirror said.

Liu Bei’s brother Guan Yu was present at the moment, and he was rather skeptical when he heard all the high praise being heaped on this Zhuge Liang, which, quite frankly, no one around here had heard of until just a few days ago.

“I know that Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4) were legends from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods,” he said. “Their accomplishments were immense. Isn’t Zhuge Liang going too far in comparing himself to them?”

But Water Mirror smiled and said, “In my opinion, he is not only comparable to those two, but two other men as well.”

“Which two?” Guan Yu asked.

“He can be compared,” Water Mirror replied, “to Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2), who helped begin the Zhou Dynasty that endured for 800 years, and Zhang (1) Liang (2), who helped found the Han Dynasty that has thrived for 400 years.”

Everyone present was astonished by this high praise, because Jiang Ziya and Zhang Liang are pretty much in the top three of any list of greatest advisers in Chinese history. His point made, Water Mirror now took his leave. Liu Bei tried to convince him to stay, but could not. As he walked out the door, Water Mirror looked up at the heavens and laughed, saying, “Sleeping Dragon has found his lord, but not his time. What a pity!”

After that, he was gone like the wind.

“Truly a recluse of great worth!” Liu Bei said with a sigh.

So after hearing more about how awesome Zhuge Liang was, Liu Bei was more pumped than ever to go see him. The next day, he set out with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei for Longzhong (2,1), where Zhuge Liang resided. Along the way, they saw in the distance a number of farmers heading toward their fields. As they walked, the farmers sang these lines:

The sky is a curving vault of blue,
The level earth a chessboard.
Where men their black and white divide,
Disgrace or glory to decide.
For the winners, peace and comfort.
For the losers, tiring toil.
In Nanyang someone lies secluded,
Securely sleeping. Stay abed!

So this song is using the Chinese game of Go, or weiqi (2,2), as a metaphor for the competition for control of the realm. The earth is compared to the game board, while people are likened to the black and white pieces placed on the board. This was some deep stuff, and far beyond what one would expect from a bunch of simple farmers. So Liu Bei held up his horse and called one of the farmers over to ask him who wrote the song.

“Master Sleeping Dragon,” was the farmer’s answer.

“Where does reside?” Liu Bei asked.

“On the south side of this mountain is a stretch of hills,” the farmer said. “That is Sleeping Dragon Ridge. In front of the ridge is a thin stretch of woods where you will find the small thatched lodge he calls home.”

Liu Bei thanked him and carried on. Within a few miles, he could see Sleeping Dragon Ridge in the distance, and it was a truly soothing, tranquil scene. A poet later wrote a piece describing the place. It’s kind of a long poem, and I’ve been doing a lot of poetry reading in this episode already, so I’m going to skip it here. But there is a link to this poem on our website, in the post for this episode. So if you’re curious, go check it out at 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3.

Soon, Liu Bei and his brothers arrived at Zhuge Liang’s residence. They dismounted and knocked on the door, which was made of brushwood. A young lad answered the door, and Liu Bei said, “Liu Bei, General of the Left of the Han court, the marquis of Yicheng (2,2) Precinct, the imperial protector of Yu (4) Province, and the imperial uncle, is here to pay his respects to your master.”

But the kid was like, “Whoa there. I can’t remember all those titles.”

“Then just tell your master that Liu Bei is here to call on him.”

“My master left this morning.”

“Where did he go?”

“Hard to say.”

“When will he be back?”

“That’s hard to say, too. It could be in three to five days, or it could be more than 10.”

Well, this was thoroughly unhelpful, and Liu Bei was very disappointed.

“Brother, since we missed him, let’s go home already,” Zhang Fei said impatiently.

“Let’s wait a short while,” Liu Bei answered.

But Guan Yu also chimed in and said, “Why don’t we go home for now and send someone here later to see if he’s back.”

Well, it’s not like Liu Bei had any other options, so he told the lad, “When your master returns, tell him that Liu Bei had come to see him.”

He then hopped back on his horse and started home with his brothers. As they traveled, they took in the area’s gorgeous scenery. The hills were more elegant than lofty, the streams more sparkling than deep, the land more smooth than spacious, and the woods more lush than large. Within the woods, gibbons and cranes played, while pine and bamboo blended their green foliage. Liu Bei could not take his eyes off this view.

Suddenly, they noticed a man coming toward them along a narrow mountain path. His countenance was imposing, and his bearing stately yet simple. A scarf was casually wrapped around his head, and a plain black gown covered his frame. As he trod down the trail, he carried a staff of goosefoot wood.

“This must be Master Sleeping Dragon!” Liu Bei exclaimed. He hurriedly dismounted, approached the man, and asked, “Sir, are you Sleeping Dragon?”

“Who are you, general?” the man asked.

“I am Liu Bei.”

“Ah,” the man said. “I am not Zhuge Liang. I am his friend Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2).”

Oops. So Liu Bei was disappointed again, but he quickly segued into more conversation with Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2), who was a known scholar in his own right.

“I have long heard of your great name,” Liu Bei said. “It is my fortune to meet you. Would you mind if I requested the benefit of your wisdom for a little while?”

So the two of them sat down on a nearby boulder, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei stood by.

“General, why are you seeking Zhuge Liang?” Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2) asked.

“The land is in total chaos and strife is everywhere,” Liu Bei answered. “I want to see Zhuge Liang so I can ask him how to restore peace and stability to the country.”

This answer prompted a lengthy response from Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2). To find out what he told Liu Bei, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.