

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 74.

Last time, we left off with Cao Cao riding high after defeating Ma Chao and pacifying Liang (2) Province, which lay in the northwestern part of the empire. As a result of his triumph, Cao Cao's prestige skyrocketed. Word of his victory soon trickled into the region of Hanzhong (4,1) and was greatly distressing to the guy running that region, the governor of Hanning (4,2), a man named Zhang (1) Lu (3).

We haven't talked about the region of Hanzhong previously in the novel, so let's talk about it now. This area lay to the south of Liang Province and to the north of Yi (4) Province. The guy who runs things in this region, Zhang Lu (3), inherited his power from his father and grandfather. His grandfather was kind of a swindler. He forged books of Daoist teachings in the Swan Call Hills in the Riverlands. No one ever got wise to his scheme, and in fact, he gained quite a reputation. After he died, his son followed in his footsteps. People who wanted to study Daoism under him had to donate five pecks of rice. And peck is equal to about 9 quarts. This price of admission earned him the moniker the Rice Rebel.

After he died, his son, Zhang Lu (3), took over and gave himself the grandiose title of Lord-Preceptor, and his followers were known as the Ghost Squad, which sounds like a Ghostbusters ripoff. Captains in this Ghost Squad were known as libationers, and those commanding large numbers of followers were dubbed head libationers.

Ironically, for a sect that started out as a scam, its main concern was sincerity. Neither lying nor deception was condoned. They also had a rather peculiar way of treating illnesses. Anyone who was sick would be placed in a secluded room, where they were to reflect upon their mistakes and make a confession. After that, everyone would pray for the patient, under the direction of a libationer. The sick man's full name was written out, his penance explained, and then three copies of his petition to

the three realms were made. One copy, a petition to heaven, would be placed on a hilltop. Another copy, made to the earth, would be buried in the ground. The third copy, a petition to the masters of the netherworld, would be placed in the water. After that, if and when the illness passes, the patient would have to donate five pecks of rice as a sign of gratitude.

In addition to their faith-based healthcare system, this sect also had public bins filled with rice, firewood, and meat. Any and all passers-by were welcome to take as much as they pleased, though if they took more than their fair share, they would be punished by heaven.

As for the sect's legal system, within the boundaries of their sphere of influence, they had a four-strikes policy. Transgressors were forgiven three times, but if they continued on their errant ways after that, they would be punished. There were no court officials, and everything was handled by the libationers.

And so in this way, Zhang Lu and his forefathers had reigned in the region of Hanzhong for 30 years. Because this was a remote area, the court deemed it not worth the trouble of an expedition to squash this bug. Instead, it simply appointed Zhang Lu as an imperial corps commander and a governor, giving him legitimacy as long as he sent regular tributes to the court. It was a tidy arrangement.

But now, upon hearing how Cao Cao had just pacified the region to his north, Zhang Lu was feeling mighty nervous and gathered his staff to discuss.

"Ma Teng of Xiliang has been killed, and Ma Chao has just been defeated," Zhang Lu said. "Cao Cao will no doubt invade our territory. I intend to declare myself the King of Hanning (4,2) and lead my forces against Cao Cao. What do you think?"

And note here that declaring yourself king of a region within the empire was basically an act of treason, since you're declaring yourself to be an alternate center of authority to the emperor.

One of Zhang Lu's advisers, Yan (2) Pu (3), said, "The Han (4) River region has about 100,000 households, immense wealth and grain, and natural fortifications on all four sides. With Ma Chao's recent defeat, there are tens of thousands of refugees fleeing from Xiliang into Hanzhong. In my humble opinion, you should first take the 41 districts of the Riverlands before you declare yourself king."

Zhang Lu was delighted by this suggestion and immediately began talking with his younger brother, Zhang Wei (4), about invading the Riverlands.

Spies soon sent word of these invasion plans back to the ruler of the Riverlands, Liu Zhang (1). This Liu Zhang was descended from the imperial clan. His father was the imperial protector of Yi (4) Province, the major province within the Riverlands. After his father died, the leading officials of the province decided to support Liu Zhang as his father's successor. And I should add here that another name for the region of the Riverlands is Shu (3). Keep that name in mind, because we will hear it mentioned plenty from here on out.

Even before Zhang Lu decided to invade the Riverlands, there was bad blood between Liu Zhang and Zhang Lu, as Liu Zhang had once upon a time killed Zhang Lu's mother and one of his younger brothers. So Liu Zhang understandably kept a close watch on his northeastern border with Hanzhong.

When word of Zhang Lu's invasion plans reached Liu Zhang, who was a meek, timid sort, he was extremely concerned and assembled his officials to talk about what to do. At this meeting, one man stepped forward boldly and said, "My lord, rest easy. I may be untalented, but with just a few words, I can see to it that Zhang Lu would not dare to set his sights on the Riverlands."

The man who spoke up was Zhang Song (1), the lieutenant inspector of Yi (4) Province. He was a most unusual looking man. He had an angular brow and a tapered head. His nose was flat, and his

teeth were protruding. Oh, and he stood less than five feet tall, but his voice reverberated like a bronze bell.

“What great idea do you have, sir, that can mitigate this threat?” Liu Zhang asked.

“I have heard that Cao Cao has swept clean the heartlands, exterminating Lü Bu, Yuan Shao, and Yuan Shu,” Zhang Song answered. “He has also recently defeated Ma Chao and is unmatched in the realm. Your lordship may prepare tribute and I will personally go to Xuchang to persuade Cao Cao to attack Hanzhong. That’d leave Zhang Lu with little time to even think about making a move on the territory of Shu (3).”

Liu Zhang liked the idea, so he prepared some fine swag and dispatched Zhang Song as envoy. BUT, unbeknownst to Liu Zhang, Zhang Song also took something else with him -- a map of the geography of the Riverlands. Hmm ... now why would he take that with him on this trip? Stay tuned.

Zhang Song set off with a few riders and headed toward Xuchang. Word of his journey quickly trickled into Jing Province, where Zhuge Liang quickly dispatched spies to Xuchang to keep him abreast of the situation.

Once Zhang Song arrived in Xuchang and settled into the guest house, he went to the prime minister’s residence every day to request an audience with Cao Cao. So apparently, since defeating Ma Chao, Cao Cao had been feeling pretty full of himself, and he spent his days feasting and rarely left his residence, preferring to work from home instead. I guess he felt he’s earned it.

Zhang Song waited three days before being able to just get his name announced. Even then, he had to bribe the attendants before they would lead him in to see Cao Cao, who was sitting in the main hall. After Zhang Song bowed, Cao Cao asked, “Your master Liu Zhang has not sent tributes to court for years. Why?”

“The journey to the capital is difficult and plagued by bandits and rebels, preventing us from coming,” Zhang Song answered.

“I have swept clean the heartlands. How can there be any rebels?” Cao Cao said derisively.

“There’s Sun Quan in the South, Zhang Lu in the North, and Liu Bei in the West. They command at least more than 100,000 armed troops. How can you say the land is pacified?”

Well, Cao Cao was already put off by Zhang Song’s appearance, and these blunt words did not help. So Cao Cao flicked his sleeve, got up, and went into his private quarters. The attendants scolded Zhang Song, “You are an envoy. How can you be so ignorant of the proper ceremonies and give such offense? Lucky for you his excellency did not punish you on account of you coming all this way. You should leave at once!”

“[Scoff] We from the Riverlands are not flatterers,” Zhang Song said with a laugh.

Just then, someone shouted, “So you from the Riverlands speak no flattery. Do you think we in the Heartlands do?!”

Zhang Song looked and saw that the man who had spoken had thin eyebrows, narrow eyes, a light face, and fine features. Zhang Song asked for his name, and learned that he was Yang (2) Xiu (1). This Yang (2) Xiu (1) was the son of the former grand commandant, and he’s currently serving as first secretary to the prime minister. He was learned, skilled with words, and smarter than the average bear.

Zhang Song had heard of this Yang Xiu, and knew that he was a fine debater, so Zhang Song decided to pick a verbal fight to show this guy a thing or two and put him in his place. On the other side, Yang Xiu was not exactly the humble type either. When he heard Zhang Song’s sarcastic remark, he invited him to the library to continue their conversation.

“The journey from Shu (3) is treacherous; your trip here must have been hard,” Yang Xiu said.

“I would walk through fire or boiling water at my master’s command,” Zhang Song replied.

“Tell me something about life in Shu,” Yang Xiu asked.

“Shu comprises the districts of the West and goes by the ancient name of Yi (4) Province,” Zhang Song said. “To reach it, you must either sail the difficult Jin (3) River or traverse the formidable Saber Gateway Road. The round trip is divided into 280 stages, spanning 10,000 miles. Roosters crow and dogs bark everywhere, and the people are always on the go. The fields are fertile and the soil productive, and we’re plagued by neither flood nor drought. Our state is wealthy and our people prosperous, and we delight in music and song. Nowhere else in the land could produce such a mountain of goods.”

After that little message brought to you by the Yi Province Tourism Bureau, Yang Xiu asked, “How are the talents in Shu?”

“In civil affairs, in military arts, in medicine, and in divination, we have men as talented as the greatest practitioners of those crafts,” Zhang Song replied. “In the various schools of philosophy and religion, we have produced more exemplary men than I can begin to count.”

“Among those in your master’s service, how many more are there like you?”

“There are hundreds who are skilled in both civil and martial arts and are wise and courageous. As for untalented men like me, we come by the cartload and by the bushel. There are too many to count.”

“What is your current position?” Yang Xiu asked.

“I am filling in as a lieutenant inspector, but I am unqualified,” Zhang Song answered. He then turned the question around. “And what position do you occupy, sir?”

“I am currently the prime minister’s first secretary.”

“I have long heard that you come from a family of distinguished officeholders. Why are you not an assistant to the emperor, but rather a lowly staffer in the prime minister’s employ?”

When Yang Xiu heard this, his face became flushed with embarrassment. Keeping his countenance, he replied, “Even though I occupy a lowly position, his excellency has entrusted me with the important responsibility of administering money and provisions for the army. I often benefit from his excellency’s instruction and have learned much. That is why I took the position.”

“[Laugh] I have heard that Prime Minister Cao does not comprehend the civil philosophies of Confucius and Mencius, nor does he match the military strategies of Sun (1) Zi (3) and Wu (2) Qi (3),” Zhang Song said with a laugh. “He has reached his high office solely by brute force. How can he have any enlightening instruction for you, sir?”

“Sir, you live in the remote borderlands. How can you know of his excellency’s great talent?” Yang Xiu retorted. “I will let you have a glimpse.”

So Yang Xiu told his attendants to fetch a scroll and showed it to Zhang Song. This was titled “The New Writings of Cao Cao.” Zhang Song skimmed it once, from start to finish. It contained 13 chapters, all on military strategies. After he finished skimming the scroll, Zhang Song asked Yang Xiu, “Sir, what do you think this is?”

“This is his excellency’s work, drawn from the past and present, and modeled on the classic “13 Chapters of Sun Zi (3).” You mock his excellency’s talent, but is this not a work worthy of being handed down to future generations?”

When he heard this, Zhang Song burst out laughing and replied, “In Shu, even little kids can recite this work. How can you call it “new writings?” This was a work by an anonymous author from the Warring States period. Prime Minister Cao just claimed it as his own, but he can only fool you!”

“This is a private work by the prime minister,” Yang Xiu protested. “Even though it has been made into a volume, it has yet to be publicized. You’ve gone too far, claiming that even little kids in Shu can recite it!”

“If you don’t believe me, then allow me to recite it for you,” Zhang Song said. He then proceeded to recite the entire work from start to finish, from memory, and did not miss a single word.

When he was done, Yang Xiu was stunned.

“Sir, you have a photographic memory! You are indeed one-of-a-kind!”

A poet later left this description of Zhang Song:

A cranky man, peculiar to describe:

Pure and upright, but coarse in countenance,

Whose words poured forth like rapids through the gorge,

Who mastered pages in a single glance.

His courage topped them all in western Shu.

To every learned sphere he stretched his pen.

In philosophy and literature he was read,

So widely that no point escaped his ken.

Having sufficiently demonstrated his talent and put Yang Xiu in his place, Zhang Song now got up to take his leave. Yang Xiu said to him, “Sir, please go rest at the guest house for now. Allow me to speak to his excellency and ask him to meet you in person again.”

After Zhang Song thanked him and left, Yang Xiu went to see Cao Cao and asked, “Why did your excellency treat Zhang Song so dismissively?”



“He was rude.”

“But your excellency was able to tolerate Mi (2) Heng (2), so why can you not do the same for Zhang Song?”

It’s been awhile since we mentioned Mi (2) Heng (2), so let’s have a quick refresher. He was a scholar of great repute. Back in episode 29, he was recommended to Cao Cao, but he played the part of insolent cynic to perfection, openly scorning Cao Cao and all of his officials, to the point where everyone wanted to kill him. Cao Cao, however, did not kill him and instead sent him as an envoy to Liu Biao. Mi Heng, who just could not help but thumb his nose at any and all authority, then promptly ticked off Liu Biao, and Liu Biao sent him to go meet with one of his commanders. Mi Heng then ticked off that commander, and THAT guy finally killed him.

“Mi Heng’s compositions are widely read, so I could not bear to kill him,” Cao Cao said to Yang Xiu. “But what skills does Zhang Song have?”

“He is superb at rhetoric and debate, and he possesses rare memory and knowledge. I showed him your excellency’s new writings. He read it once and was able to recite the whole thing. He even claimed that it was an anonymous work from the Warring States period and that even little kids in Shu could recite it from memory.”

Cao Cao’s reaction to this might surprise you. You’d think that he would be incensed at Zhang Song for mocking his work, but instead, he said, “Could it be that my writings coincidentally match those of the ancients?” He then proceeded to tear apart his scroll and burn it. So umm, either he’s so ethical that he would not think of taking credit for another’s work, OR, he got called out and now he’s covering his tracks. I’ll let you decide which is true.

In any case, the more important point was that Yang Xiu managed to convince Cao Cao to grant Zhang Song another audience.

“I think you should see him and let him witness the magnificence of the imperial court,” Yang Xiu suggested.

“Tomorrow I will be inspecting the army in the west field. Bring him then and let him see my troops’ prowess, so that he may go home and spread the word that once I have conquered the South, I will be coming for the Riverlands.”

So the next day, Yang Xiu fetched Zhang Song and brought him to the west field to let him behold the awesome sight that was Cao Cao’s army. For this occasion, Cao Cao had rounded up 50,000 of his elite tiger guards. Their helmets and armor gleamed, their robes radiated brilliant colors, gongs and drums resounded to the heavens, and halberds and spears glinted in the sun. Echelons of warriors stretched in eight directions, and buntings and banners spangled and streamed while men on horses pranced and vaulted against the horizon.

Yeah, that’s right, Zhang Song. What do you think of Cao Cao now?

Well, Zhang Song merely glanced sideways at this third-century military parade. After a while, Cao Cao summoned him and asked, while pointing to his troops, “Have you seen such impressive troops in the Riverlands?”

“[Scoff] I have not seen such military displays in our land,” Zhang Song replied. And Cao Cao was probably just about to gloat, but Zhang Song finished his thought. “We only govern through humanity and justice.”

At this, Cao Cao’s countenance changed from one of satisfaction to one of, umm, let’s just say less satisfaction? And anyone who’s been paying attention to the novel knows that when Cao Cao stares at you with a look of dissatisfaction, trouble can’t be far behind. Yet, Zhang Song showed no sign of fear, even as Yang Xiu tried like hell to throw him a look to say, “Dude, watch yourself!”

"I view the vermins of the realm as mere weeds," Cao Cao said, again trying to intimidate Zhang Song. "Wherever my troops go, every time they fight, they win. Whatever town they attack, they sack. Those who obey me live; those who oppose me die. Are YOU aware of that?"

"Oh yes, wherever your excellency's army marches, every time it fights, it wins. Every town it attacks, it sacks. I am well aware," Zhang Song replied.

So once again, Cao Cao was thinking, yeah, that's right; you best recognize. Except of course, Zhang Song was once again setting him up for a punch line.

"Like when you attacked Lü Bu at Puyang (2,2), battled Zhang Xiu (4) at Wancheng (3,2), ran into Zhou Yu at Red Cliff, met Guan Yu at Huarong (2,2), cut your beard and threw away your cloak at Tong (2) Pass, seized a boat and dodged arrows at the River Wei (4). Yes, you were truly invincible."

So if you knew exactly what Zhang Song was referring to for each of those battles he just named, then gold star for you. But in case you can't remember, here's a quick refresher: When Cao Cao attacked Lü Bu at Puyang (2,2), he was ambushed and nearly perished in a fire. When he battled Zhang Xiu (4) at Wancheng (3,2), he lost not only a bunch of troops, but also his oldest son, his favorite nephew, and his manbeast warrior Dian (3) Wei (2), all because he wanted to sleep with Zhang Xiu's (4) sister-in-law. As for when he faced Zhou Yu at Red Cliff and Guan Yu at Huarong, I really hope I don't need to refresh your memory on those two, since if you don't know the significance of Red Cliff, then you probably haven't been paying attention for the last four months. And I hope you still remember the last two references, which alluded to Cao Cao's losing battles against Ma (3) Chao (1), which we just wrapped up a few weeks ago.

So in short, Zhang Song had just given Cao Cao the metaphorical middle finger. If he was trying to get Cao Cao angry, well, congratulations, you've succeeded. And for your good work, you now have a

ticked-off Cao Cao ordering the guards to drag you outside and cut off your head. I hope that sense of satisfaction you got from telling off the prime minister was worth it.

At this point, Yang Xiu stepped in and pleaded for Zhang Song's life.

"Although Zhang deserves to die, he has made the difficult journey from Shu (3) to offer tribute. If you execute him, you might lose the support of the people in that distant region."

Cao Cao was still fuming, and it was only after another adviser intervened that he backed away from having Zhang Song executed. Instead, he ordered the guards to beat him with sticks and kick him out. Thus unceremoniously dismissed, Zhang Song returned to his guest house, packed up, and left town that night.

As he headed back toward the Riverlands, Zhang Song thought to himself, "I was going to offer the Riverlands to Cao Cao, but who knew he would treat me with such contempt?! Before I came on this mission, I had bragged in front of my lord Liu Zhang (1). But now I'm returning in disgrace and empty-handed. That will surely make me a butt of jokes in Shu."

As he was lamenting how Cao Cao dared to get angry at someone who repeatedly scorned him, a thought occurred to Zhang Song.

"I have long heard about the immense humanity and honor of Liu Bei in Jing (1) Province. Why don't I take that route back and check him out, and then act accordingly?"

So Zhang Song and his attendants headed toward the borders of Jing Province. As he neared the border, he was met by a squad of about 500 riders, led by a general who was lightly equipped and wore no armor.

"Could our visitor be lieutenant inspector Zhang Song?" the general asked as he rode forward.

"Indeed I am," Zhang Song replied.

At this, the general quickly dismounted and said, "I am Zhao Yun. I have been waiting here for you for a long time."

Zhang Song also dismounted to return the courtesy.

"You are Zhao Yun of Changshan (2,1)?"

"Yes. My lord Liu Bei ordered me to welcome you with wine and food to help relieve the fatigue from your long journey."

As Zhao Yun spoke, a couple of his men kneeled and held up said food and wine, and Zhao Yun offered them to Zhang Song. This gesture greatly impressed their guest.

"Everyone says Liu Bei is magnanimous and hospitable," Zhang Song thought to himself. "Looks like that is indeed the case."

So Zhang Song drank a few cups with Zhao Yun, and then they hopped back on their horses and continued to the borders of Jing Province. It was getting late, so they went directly to a guest house. Outside the house stood about a hundred people, who banged drums to welcome their honored guest. Another general dismounted and bowed.

"Sir, my brother has ordered me, Guan Yu, to welcome you and prepare this house for you to rest from your journey."

So Zhang Song entered the house, accompanied by Guan Yu and Zhao Yun. Shortly after they sat down, a feast commenced. The two generals were very good hosts, urging Zhang Song to enjoy himself. They drank late into the night before retiring.

After breakfast the next morning, the group got back on the road, but they had not gone but a mile or so before they were met by another welcome party. This one was led by none other than Liu Bei, who was accompanied by Master Sleeping Dragon and Master Young Phoenix. When Liu Bei saw

Zhang Song from a distance, he quickly dismounted and stood in attendance. Zhang Song hurriedly dismounted as well to greet him.

“Your great name has long been echoing in my ears like thunder,” Liu Bei said. “My only regret is that we were too far apart and I could not seek your instruction. I heard that you were on your way home, so I came to meet you here. If it’s not beneath you, please take brief rest in my barren province so that I may fulfill my longtime wish. It would be my great fortune!”

Well, since you put it that way, I guess Zhang Song can take a few hours out of his busy schedule to make time for Liu Bei. So he followed Liu Bei and company into the city and went to the main hall of the administrative compound. There, they exchanged the usual courtesies, followed, of course, by the requisite banquet.

While they drank, Liu Bei just made small talk and said nothing about the Riverlands. After a while, Zhang Song just couldn’t take the suspense anymore and tried to steer the conversation that way.

“Imperial uncle,” he asked, “aside from Jing Province, how many other districts do you control?”

Zhuge Liang chimed in and answered, “Jing Province is on loan from Dongwu, and they keep bugging us to return it. It’s only because my lord is Dongwu’s son-in-law that he is allowed to temporarily stay here.”

“Dongwu controls six districts and 81 regions. Their people are strong and their state wealthy. How can they thirst for more?” Zhang Song said.

Master Young Phoenix, Pang Tong, now joined in.

“My master, the imperial uncle, has no land to his name, and yet those greedy traitors can all seize territory on power alone. All wise men would decry such an injustice!”

That was Liu Bei’s cue. “Good sirs, do not speak thusly,” he said. “What virtue have I that I would dare expect more?”

“Not so,” Zhang Song objected. “Your lordship is a member of the imperial house, and your humanity and honor reach far and wide. It would not be out of line were you to inherit the throne, much less take some land.”

“Sir, you give me far too much credit,” Liu Bei said.

So everyone is just kind of beating around the bush here. To see how long it'll take for them to actually start speaking plainly, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.