

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 8.

Last time, while on the run from the law, Lu Da ran into the old man and his daughter that he had rescued, and they introduced him to the young woman's new husband, a Squire Zhao (4). The squire admired Lu Da very much and told him that if he wanted a refuge, he could leave his old life behind and become a monk at a Buddhist monastery on Wutai (5,2) Mountain. Lu Da figured he had nothing to lose, so off went the hair and the beard, and on came the monk clothes and the Buddhist sanctions against killing, drinking, eating meat, you know, everything that made life fun for a man like Lu Da.

So, we pick up our story right after the squire had taken his leave from the monastery, and Lu Zhishen, as Lu Da was now known within his monastic order, began his new life. He went back to the meditation room. In this room were rows of beds where monks were supposed sit cross-legged and meditate for significant parts of the day. Lu Zhishen went to his spot, threw himself onto his bed, and went to sleep.

The monks sitting on either side of him shook him awake and told him, "You can't do that. If you're going to be a monk, then you have to learn how to sit and meditate."

"What's it to you if I want to sleep?" Lu Zhishen shot back.

"Evil!" the monks exclaimed.

"What? Eels? What are you talking about? It's turtles that I like to eat."

"Oh bitter!"

"Bitter? No. Turtles have fat and sweet bellies. They are delicious."

Ok, so those few lines there came right out of the Sidney Shapiro translation of the novel, and I think he took a little liberty with the translation there to make the jokes sort of work. Basically it's just a silly little play on words that sound kind of similar. In any case, let's move on.

Seeing that it was no use talking to Lu Zhishen, the monks around him just ignored him and let him sleep, which was all he wanted anyway. But then, the next day, those monks wanted to go tattle to the

abbot, but the elder restrained them, telling them, “The abbot is covering up for this man, saying that he will attain sainthood and that none of us are his equal. There’s nothing we can do about it; just don’t sink to his level.”

So the monks went back to their business. Lu Zhishen, meanwhile, saw that no one was giving him crap about sleeping, so he decided to stop restraining himself. He sprawled out on his bed every night and snored thunderously. When he had to go use the bathroom, he made a terrible racket. Oh, and he did his business behind one of the buildings instead of, you know, using the latrine like a decent human being would. He left his mess all over the ground. It's almost like he was going out of his way to be offensive. I mean, c’mon, monastic propriety aside, this guy was a freakin’ public health nightmare.

The abbot’s assistant reported this to the abbot. “Zhishen is so rude,” the assistant said. “He does not behave like a monk at all. How can we keep someone like that at the monastery?”

“Nonsense!” the abbot lectured his assistant. “Tolerate it for now as a favor to our patron; he will change his ways in the future.”

And that was that. Nobody else dared to say anything about Lu Zhishen sleeping through meditations or keeping everyone else awake with his snoring or, you know, crapping all over the ground. In such a way, about 5 months passed, and it was now early winter. Lu Zhishen was starting to get cabin fever, or monastery fever, I guess. One clear day, he put on his black cloth cassock, fastened his raven-dark girdle, changed into his monk shoes, and walked out of the monastery for some fresh air.

Halfway down the mountain, he stopped to rest in a pavilion. Sitting on a low goose-neck bench, he thought to himself, “Hell. I used to have good meat and wine every day. But since I became a monk, I’ve been wasting away from starvation. And Squire Zhao hasn’t sent anyone to deliver good food for me in a few days. My mouth is bland as hell. If only I can find some wine somehow.”

Did somebody say wine? Because, hey, right on cue, a man approached from the distance. He had across his shoulders a pole that carried two covered buckets. He held a ladle in his hand, and as he walked, he sang these lines:

Before the mountain an old battlefield lies,  
There cowherds find ancient spears and knives,  
As a breeze stirs the waters of the Wu (1) River broad,  
We recall Lady Yu's (2) farewell to her lord.

Now, those lines were a reference to the dramatic final battle between the two rivals who fought for control of the empire in the year 202 BC, so about 1300 years before the time of our novel. I could go into all that background, but really, the only thing Lu Zhishen cared about was what this guy was carrying, not what he was singing.

When he came near, the man stopped into the pavilion to rest as well, and Zhishen said, "Hey you. What's in your buckets?"

"Good wine."

"How much for a bucket?"

But the man said, "Are you serious?"

"What? Why would I kid you?"

"Look, I'm carrying this wine up to sell to the monastery's cooks, janitors, sedan chair carriers, caretakers, and field laborers, and no one else," the man said, rattling off the various staff positions that were filled by lay people who were not subject to the strict prohibitions that the monks had to follow. "The abbot has warned us that if we sell any wine to the monks, we will be punished. We got our startup

capital from the monastery, and we live in houses owned by the monastery. If we sell to any monks, the abbot will take back the money and kick us out of our homes. So how would I dare to sell to you?"

"You really won't sell to me?"

"Not even if you kill me!"

"I'm not going to kill you; I just want to buy wine from you!"

Sensing that things were building up to an unpleasant crescendo, the man tried to pick up his buckets and leave. But Lu Zhishen followed him out of the pavilion, grabbed his shoulder pole with both hands and kicked the guy in the groin, making this the second time in three episodes that he had kicked a man in the crotch. The guy crumpled to the ground with both hands over the bruised family jewels and could not get up for a long time.

Meanwhile, Zhishen took both buckets back to the pavilion, picked up the ladle off the ground, and started scooping out wine and drinking right there, nevermind that it was cold wine. Remember, in this era people generally warmed up the wine before drinking, but after having gone dry for 5 months, Lu Zhishen wasn't picky. Before long, one of the buckets was empty.

"Hey you, come to the monastery tomorrow to get your money," Lu Zhishen said to the man, who was just now getting back on his feet. Now, of course, the guy was not going to go to the monastery and ask a monk for wine money. How was he going to explain that one to the abbot? So he had no choice but to swallow the loss. He divided the remaining wine evenly between the two buckets, grabbed his ladle, and rushed off the mountain, lest Lu Zhishen decided that he wanted the other bucket, too.

As for Lu Zhishen, he languished for half a day at the pavilion, and by now, he was starting to feel that bucket of grain alcohol he had chugged. After he left the pavilion, he sat down next to a pine tree for a while longer. And now, he was really buzzing. He stripped down to his waist, tying the sleeves of his

cassock around the waist. His tattoo-covered back was bare as he strode up the mountain, swinging his arms wildly.

Back at the monastery, the two monks watching the gate spotted Lu Zhishen staggering toward them from a distance. As he approached the gate, they blocked his path with bamboo staffs and scolded him, “You are supposed to be a disciple of Buddha. How dare you get so drunk and come here. You’re not blind. You can see the notice that’s been posted: Any monk who breaks the prohibition on drinking will receive 40 blows with a bamboo rod and be expelled from the monastery. Any gate-keeper who lets a drunk monk inside will also receive 10 blows. Leave now, and we’ll spare you a beating.”

Oh you guys. Of all the things these gate-keepers could have said and done, they decided to threaten a thoroughly inebriated Lu Zhishen with a beating?

Glowering at the monks, Lu Zhishen cursed them, “Mother-raping thieves! If you want to beat me, then bring it!”

It was at this point that the gate-keepers began to realize their poor choice of words. One of them flew inside to tell the supervisor, while the other made a faint-hearted attempt to block Lu Zhishen with his bamboo staff.

Lu Zhishen pushed away the bamboo staff and smacked the poor monk in the face with an open hand, sending him staggering backward. As the monk tried to recover and regain his footing, he was introduced to Lu Zhishen’s fist, which sent him crumpling to the ground, moaning in pain.

“I’ll let you off easy this time,” Lu Zhishen told the monk on the ground as he stumbled past and went inside.

By now, the supervisor had gotten word of what was transpiring, so he rounded up the caretakers, the cooks, the janitors, the sedan-chair carriers, you know, all the guys who WERE allowed to drink wine.

They were about 30 men in all, and they all carried wooden staves and rushed out just in time to meet Lu Zhishen as he entered the monastery.

Seeing this welcoming party, Lu Zhishen let out a thunderous roar and stomped forward. Now, none of these guys knew that he used to be a military officer, but they were smart enough to see that he was not one to mess with, so they all now scrambled and hid in the sutra hall, barring the doors behind them.

But Lu Zhishen was not about to be stopped by a barred door. He crashed into the hall, smashing the doors open. Now the guys inside were trapped, so they had no choice but to grab their staves and try their luck.

At that moment, the abbot had gotten word and rushed onto the scene a few attendants. He shouted, "Zhishen, stop!"

Now, Lu Zhishen may be a brute, and he may be drunk, but he still recognized the abbot. He immediately tossed aside the staff in his hand and bowed to the abbot. He then pointed at the battered and bruised workers and said, "I just had a little wine. I didn't bother them. But they ganged up to beat me."

"For my sake, go get some rest right now," the abbot told him. "We'll deal with this tomorrow."

Lu Zhishen turned to the workers and monks and said, "If not for the abbot, I would have killed you bald donkeys!" Bald donkey, by the way, was a derogatory term aimed at monks because of their shaved heads. Of course, the irony here is that Lu Zhishen was himself now a bald donkey, but he had no compunction of throwing that slur around.

Anyway, the abbot had an attendant help Lu Zhishen back to the monks' hall, where he promptly collapsed onto his bed and fell sound asleep, snoring thunderously as usual.

While Zhishen slept, the monks on the monastery staff gathered around the abbot and said, “We told you so. How can our monastery tolerate this feral cat? He upsets our pure way of life.”

“He has indeed been a bit unruly,” the abbot said, in just a bit of an understatement. “But he will attain sainthood in the future. For the sake of our patron Squire Zhao, forgive him just this one time. I will go lecture him tomorrow.”

The monks all scoffed at the abbot’s insistence on not expelling Lu Zhishen, but they did let it go for now and dispersed.

The next day, after breakfast, the abbot sent his assistant to the monks’ hall to summon Lu Zhishen, but he was still asleep when the assistant got there. The assistant waited while Zhishen put on his clothes. Suddenly, Lu Zhishen took off, barefoot, and rushed out of the hall. The assistant was alarmed and quickly followed, only to find him squatting behind the hall, defecating. When you gotta go, you gotta go. The assistant tried his best not to laugh, and after Zhishen was done, the assistant told him that the abbot had called for him.

Zhishen followed the assistant to the abbey, and the abbot said to him, “Zhishen, you may have been a warrior, but when Squire Zhao sponsored you to be a monk, I instructed you that you must not kill, steal, fornicate, drink, or lie. All monks live by these five precepts, and first among them is the prohibition on drinking. So why did you get so drunk last night, beat up the gatekeepers, damage the door of the sutra hall, and drive out all the workers, shouting and yelling all the while?”

Falling to his knees, Lu Zhishen said, “I will never do it again.”

“You have become a monk, and yet you first broke the prohibition on drinking and then disrupted our pure way of life,” the abbot said. “If not for the sake of your sponsor, Squire Zhao, I would expel you for sure. Do not break the rules again.”

Standing up, Zhishen put his hands together and said, “I will not dare.”

Having set him straight, the abbot now kept Zhishen in the abbey for breakfast and used kind words to prod him to do better. He also gave Zhishen a cassock made of fine cloth and a pair of monk's shoes before sending him back to the monks' hall.

So the novel here, kind of just out of the blue, gets into a little moralizing and lectures the readers that whenever one drinks, one should not drink their fill. As the common saying goes: Wine can spur action or ruin everything. It makes even the timid brave, so imagine what it would do to the bold and impetuous. Or in the words of Homer Simpson: alcohol, the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems. Well, I guess not so much solution in this case.

Anyway, Lu Zhishen was much chastened after his little drunken outburst, and did not even set foot outside the monastery for 3 or 4 months. Then one day in the second month of the lunar year, so around March by our calendars, the weather suddenly warm up. Lu Zhishen walked out, stood just outside the monastery gates, and took in the majestic views of the mountain.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of clanging metal drifting up the mountain on the warm spring breeze. That reminded him of something. He went back to his quarters, got out some silver, and went down the mountain. After he walked past the sign that said, "Wutai, a Blessed Place," he found himself entering a market town of about 600 families. As he looked around, he could see people peddling meat, vegetables, flour, and wine.

"What an idiot I was!" he thought to himself. "If I had known this place existed, I would have come down here to drink instead of taking that wine on the mountain. I've been so deprived lately; let me go find something good to eat."

He followed the sound of clanging metal to a blacksmith's shop, which sat next to a building with a sign that said, "Father and Son Inn." The novel doesn't make much of this, but I'd imagine a blacksmith's shop is probably among the worst neighbor you can find for an inn.



Anyway, Lu Zhishen went over to the blacksmith's shop and saw three people hammering away.

"Master smith, do you have any good steel?" he asked.

One of the blacksmiths looked up and was startled to see this tall brute with newly sprouted bristles on his face standing in front of him. He greeted Lu Zhishen and asked what he wanted to make.

"I want to make a Buddhist staff and a knife," Zhishen said. "Do you have any good steel?"

So, let me explain quickly here. The Buddhist staff is this long, metal staff. It typically has a crown-like ornament on one end, and the other is wrapped with something soft, probably fabric. It was used keep monks awake while they're meditating. If you're caught starting to doze off, the abbot might poke you gently with the soft end to wake you up. But that's not the version of the Buddhist staff Lu Zhishen was asking for here. The one he asked for has a spade on one end and a crescent-shaped blade on the other, and both of them are sharp. So you do NOT want to get poked with this thing if you're falling asleep during meditation.

As for the knife, in the Chinese text, he asked for something called a jiedao (4,1), which was a type of knife used by monks for cutting cloth when sewing. But as you can imagine, Lu Zhishen was asking for a pointier, deadlier variation of that.

The master smith now said, "We have some good steel. How heavy would you like for the staff and knife to be?"

"I want a staff that weighs 100 catties," Zhishen said.

The master smith laughed and said, "That's too heavy. I can make it, but how are you going to wield it? Even Lord Guan's saber only weighed 81 catties."

So the Lord Guan the blacksmith referred to here was a historical figure from the Three Kingdoms era named Guan Yu, and his reputation was greatly enhanced by his portrayal in the novel the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. He is a ubiquitous figure in Chinese culture, revered for his honor and for his martial prowess. According to legend, he wielded a weapon called the green dragon saber, which

weighed 81 catties, or about 107 pounds. Hey, if you want to know more about Guan Yu, you should listen to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast that was started by this really cool guy a few years ago.

Anyway, Lu Zhishen did not take kindly to this perceived slight from the blacksmith. "So I'm not Guan Yu's equal? He was just a man, too."

"Sir, I'm looking out for you. If we make one that's 40 or 50 catties, that's plenty heavy."

"Fine, we'll do as you say and make one that's 81 catties, just like Guan Yu's saber."

"Sir, if it's too clunky it won't look good, and it won't be useful. Listen to me. Make a 62-catty staff of burnished metal. Now, if you can't wield it, don't blame me, ok? And as for the knife, we don't need any more specifications. I'll make one out of top-rate steel."

And by the way, 62 catties is 82 pounds. To put that into perspective, that's about how much 9 cats weigh. So imagine whirling 9 cats around for a weapon.

"How much for both items?" Lu Zhishen asked.

"We don't haggle. 5 taels of silver, and that's the real price."

So, pro tip: If you're ever in China and a merchant says they don't haggle and that whatever price they gave you was the real price, definitely haggle, because the price they gave you was probably more than double the real price they're willing to sell for. But Lu Zhishen was an honest, no-nonsense kind of guy, so he did not haggle.

"It's a deal," he told the blacksmith. "If you do a good job, I'll tip you."

The blacksmith took the silver and said he would start right away.

"I also have some loose silver here," Lu Zhishen said. "Come have a bowl of wine with me."

But the blacksmith told him, "Sir, please excuse me, but I need to get back to my work and cannot keep you company."

So Lu Zhishen left the blacksmith shop and walked for about 30 steps before spotting a tavern's banner sticking out from the eaves of a house. He raised the door curtain and went in, sat down, and pounded on the table.

"Bring me wine."

But the tavern owner came out and said, "Sir, please forgive me. But my house belongs to the monastery, and the capital for my business also came from the monastery. The abbot has warned us that if we sell wine to the monks from the monastery, he would claw back our capital and evict us. Please don't hold it against me."

"C'mon. Just sell me a little bit," Lu Zhishen said. "I won't tell anyone I got it here."

"I can't. Please go elsewhere. I'm sorry."

Thus denied, Lu Zhishen had no choice but to get up and go. But as he was walking out, he warned the owner, "If I can get wine at another tavern, you'll be hearing from me."

So he stepped back outside and walked a few more paces and saw another tavern. He went in, sat down, and shouted, "Shopkeep, bring me wine!"

"Sir, don't you have any sense?" the shopkeeper said. "You must know of the abbot's warning, so why are you here trying to cost us our living?"

Lu Zhishen refused to leave, but to no avail. So he moved on to the next tavern, and the next, and the next. In fact, he hit up four or five taverns, and none of them would sell him any wine, making this the driest pub crawl ever.

Just then, a light bulb went on in his head. He saw a small house at the far end of the market, situated amid blossoming apricot trees, with a bundle of broom straw hanging up. He walked over and saw that it was a small tavern. He went inside, sat down by a small window, and shouted, "Host, bring wine for a wandering monk."

The tavern owner came over, took a look, and asked, "Where are you from?"

"I am a traveling monk passing through here. I want some wine."

"Look, if you are from the monastery on Wutai Mountain, then I can't sell to you."

"I'm not, so sell me some wine already."

The tavern owner looked him over some more. Well, this guy certainly didn't look like a monk from the Wutai Mountain monastery, or really any monastery for that matter. Also, remember that Lu Zhishen wasn't from around here, so his accent was that of an outsider. So the tavern owner bought his story.

"How much wine do you want?" he asked Lu Zhishen.

"Don't ask how much; just keep it coming in big bowls."

Ten bowls later, Lu Zhishen asked, "Do you have any meat? Bring me a plate if you do."

"We had some beef earlier, but it's all gone. We just have vegetables now," the tavern owner said.

But just then, Zhishen caught the wafting aroma of meat being cooked. He followed his nose out to a clearing and saw an earthenware pot sitting next to a wall. Inside the pot, a dog was stewing in its own juices. Yeah, I know, but alas, dogs were relatively common menu items at this time.

"Hey, you have dog meat. Why didn't you sell me some?" Zhishen demanded.

"I thought since you're a monk, you don't eat dog, so I didn't ask you," the tavern owner said.

"I've got silver right here," Zhishen said as he shoved some money into the tavern owner's hand.

"Sell me half of that dog."

So the owner quickly plated half of the dog and put it in front of Zhishen along with some minced garlic paste. Delighted, Zhishen tore the meat apart with his bare hands, dipped it in the garlic paste, and chowed down, chugging more wine as he went. He drank another 10 bowls of wine in the blink of an eye and showed no sign of slowing down. The tavern owner was dumbfounded by now.

"That's enough, monk," he said.

Glaring at him, Zhishen said, "It's not like I'm drinking for free, so what do you care?"

"[Sigh] How much more wine do you want?"

"Another bucket."

Moments later, another bucket of wine was placed on the table. And shortly thereafter, that bucket was gone, too. Lu Zhishen now got up, stashed the remaining dog leg in his shirt, and headed for the door. As he walked out, he said, "I've got plenty of money; I'll come back again tomorrow."

As Zhishen walked away, the tavern owner was left standing there, mouth agape as he watched Zhishen stagger toward Wutai Mountain. Uhh ... but he said he wasn't from ... oh boy.

When Zhishen reached the pavilion at the midway point up the mountain, he sat down to rest, and he started to feel the wine. Working on a nice buzz, he leaped to his feet and said, "I haven't had a good workout in a long time. I'm getting stiff and creaky in the joints. Let me try a few moves here."

So he stepped out of the pavilion, gripped his sleeves with his hands, and started swinging his arms left, right, up, down. His arms swung harder and harder, until suddenly, one arm accidentally struck a post of the pavilion. There was a loud crack as the post snapped, followed by a thunderous crash as half the pavilion came tumbling down.

Farther up the mountain, outside the monastery, the two gatekeeper monks were just minding their own business when suddenly, a cracking sound echoed across the mountain, followed by a loud crashing sound. Feeling a great disturbance in the force, the gatekeepers climbed to a high vantage point and saw Lu Zhishen staggering up the mountain.

"Oh crap!" the gatekeepers cried. "That brute is soused again!"

To see what kind of ruckus this drunk monk will bring this time, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Lu Zhishen volunteers to do some premarital counseling. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!