

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 1.

So, you might be asking, what is the Water Margin, and why is there a podcast about it? It's one of the great classic Chinese novels. If you're not familiar with it, then picture it this way: Take the story of Robin Hood, amp up the character count to the level of, say, the Illiad. Add in a dash of the X-men, where every superhero has his or her own special powers. Mix with some of the elements of brotherhood and magic from Lord of the Rings. Infuse it with the bloodthirstiness of the HBO series Rome, and set it against the historical backdrop of one of the golden ages of one of the world's great empires, and you will arrive at some approximation of the Water Margin.

Oh, and by the way, for billions of people around the world, the Water Margin is as significant to their culture as the plays of Shakespeare are to the culture of the West. So, you know, this might be worth a little bit of your time.

This podcast is my attempt to retell this great work of Chinese literature in a way that makes it more accessible for English speakers who may not be familiar with the book or Chinese culture and history.

This is actually my second podcast in this vein. The first one was on the novel the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. That podcast ran from 2014 to 2018 and is now complete. If you want to check that one out, go to 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3. I had so much fun with that one and found such an enthusiastic audience that I decided to start this podcast once I wrapped up that project.

Much like the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the Water Margin is a ubiquitous part of Chinese culture. It's no exaggeration to say that basically every Chinese person is familiar with at least the novel's main characters. The colorful stories from the novel have been told and retold for centuries, in tea houses of the Ming Dynasty, on opera stages, on radio programs, in television shows, on the movie screen, and in countless Chinese homes generation after generation. I still remember my Dad reading the novel to me during my kindergarten days as he tried to get me to take a nap after lunch. Alas, it didn't do much for my naps, since the stories were the opposite of sleep-inducing, but it did plant the

seeds of a lifelong love for the novel, and now I want to share that with the half of the world that barely knows this amazing work exists.

Before we dive into the story, I want to spend the rest of this episode giving you a brief introduction to the novel and the historical backdrop against which it is set. The English title “Water Margin” is a literal translation of the Chinese title, and it refers to swamp or marsh. An alternate English title that you will often see for the book is “Outlaws of the Marsh.” In fact, that is the URL for the podcast website: outlawsofthemarsh.com.

As that title suggests, the novel is about a bunch of outlaws -- 108 of them to be exact -- who have set up camp, on a mountain, surrounded by -- you guessed it -- a marsh. Each of these outlaws have their own backstory, their own special skills, and their own colorful nicknames. They're kind of like comic book superheroes in that way. Or, if you want another contemporary analogy, to borrow a line from my wife, they are like Klingons running amok in 12th century China. They are guided by an overwhelming sense of honor, at least in theory if not always in practice. They're quick to anger and quicker to draw their swords; and they love drinking and partying -- all characteristics that indeed make them very Klingon-esque. Except they are repressed as all when it comes to sex and women, as we will see. So I guess they are kind of like Victorian Klingons?

Anyway, the book is a work of historical fiction, and it's almost entirely fictional with just a little dash of real history. Some of the characters have some loose historical basis, and the places and historical period in which the events are set are real, but beyond that, it's all made up. The novel is set in the Northern Song Dynasty, specifically during the reign of the emperor Huizong (1,1). That would put the events of the book somewhere in the years 1101 to 1125.

While the novel is set in the early 12th century, it was written sometime in the 14th century, during the early Ming Dynasty. There is a lot of disagreement over exactly who wrote the novel. The most commonly held view is that it was written by a scholar named Shi (1) Nai'an (4,1), who lived from 1296 to 1372. But there is also a theory that Shi (1) Nai'an (4,1) was not solely responsible for the full version of the novel that we know today. Many believe that he may have written the first 70 chapters, but that a student of his, named Luo (2) Guanzhong (3,4), wrote the last 30 chapters and edited the novel. Luo Guanzhong, by the way, is himself the generally recognized author of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, so he potentially had a hand in two of the greatest works of Chinese literature. Not bad for one lifetime.

There are several other theories about the authorship of the Water Margin. Some believe that Luo Guanzhong himself wrote the whole thing, and that Shi (1) Nai'an (4,1) was just a pen name, or ink brush name, I guess. There are a couple possible reasons why somebody might write this novel under a pseudonym. The Water Margin is written in the vernacular, and writing in the vernacular was disdained by scholars of the time, so the author might not have wanted his true name attached to such a low-brow work or he'll never hear the end of it from his literary friends. Also, the subject matter of this novel could be seen as glorifying outlaws and rebels, which would not sit well with the government. So the author might have opted for a pen name to protect his reputation and, incidentally, life.

That said, the idea that Luo Guanzhong wrote the whole thing himself has not gained widespread traction. Beyond that, there are a few other even less accepted theories that attribute the work to a couple other scholars of the Ming Dynasty, and another that claims the novel was written by someone in the Song Dynasty, the general time period in which the novel is set. But like I said, these are generally not given a lot of credence. For our purposes, I'm going with the most commonly accepted theory -- that

Shi Nai'an was a real person, and that he was responsible for at least the bulk of the novel we know today, and maybe Luo Guanzhong wrote the latter portion.

That being the case, I should give you a short introduction to Shi Nai'an. Now, one of the issues we run into is that there isn't much reliable biographical information about him, and that's actually one of the reasons for the disagreement over whether he actually wrote the book, or even existed at all. Much of what we sort of know comes from less-than-reliable sources, so please take the following information with a grain of salt.

Shi Nai'an lived during the transition from the Yuan (2) Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty. During the Yuan Dynasty, China was ruled by the Mongols as part of the vast empire that Genghis Khan and his descendants conquered. It was during this period that Marco Polo supposedly made his visit to China.

As you can imagine, there was no shortage of resentment among the Chinese about being ruled by people they deemed barbarian invaders. After less than a century of Mongol rule, various rebellions rose up in the 1350s and helped bring down the Yuan Dynasty, expelling the Mongols. After that, the rebel factions fought among themselves until one man was left standing, founding the Ming Dynasty in the year 1368.

If you compare the timeline of this period with Shi Nai'an's life, you'll see that he spent the bulk of his life under the Yuan Dynasty. He was supposedly born into a poor family. His father made a living as a boatman. Shi Nai'an's family was too poor to send him to school, so he studied on his own starting at a young age. At 19, he passed the imperial entrance exam, the test that the government used to identify new talent to fill its ranks. That put him on the first rung of the ladder to a possible career as a government official, which was seen as basically the holy grail, because of all the grifting you can do as a government official. I'm not kidding. Grift is literally an expected part of the job, and you'll see that attitude expressed in the novel.

For the next 17 years, Shi Nai'an continued to pass one level of government testing after another, until there were no more tests left to take. At age 36, he was appointed to a post overseeing the administration of a county.

But after all that hard work to get a government job, Shi Nai'an stayed in that job for just a couple years before becoming fed up with his Mongol overseers and resigning in a fit of anger. Some sources say that he then opened a school in his home, taking on young aspiring scholars. One of those students was Luo Guanzhong, the future author of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. It's said that it was during this time that Shi Nai'an first began writing the Water Margin.

A couple decades later, in the 1350s, rebellions began to break out across the land as we had mentioned. Shi Nai'an actually joined up with one of the rebel factions for a short while, serving as a strategist. But he and the leader of the faction had creative differences, and Shi Nai'an quit, choosing to go wandering across the land instead.

Sometime in the 1350s or 60s, the Water Margin was completed and published. It apparently became very popular very quickly. Now, according to one folk tale, the novel became a little too popular and rose to the attention of the first emperor of the newly founded Ming Dynasty. The emperor reviewed the book and decided that, you know, I really don't care for all this stuff about outlaws and rebels flaunting the government, seeing how I just established MY government. And he suspected Shi Nai'an of harboring thoughts of rebellion. That landed Shi Nai'an in prison. He was released after more than a year, but the damage had been done. His health was failing and he got even sicker on the way home, so he had to lay up midway on his journey, and he died the next year. See, this is why someone might be tempted to write a novel like this under a pen name.

Of course, that's just one unreliable source among many. Other sources simply said Shi Nai'an died of illness a few years after the publication of the Water Margin. They don't mention anything about him

running afoul of the government. In fact, some sources say the new Ming Dynasty government tried time and again to give him a job, but he steadfastly refused. But really, when it comes down to it, like I said before, there is just not that much reliable information about his life, so treat all this with a heavy dose of skepticism.

If you are interested in reading the novel for yourself, there are several English translations of it. The best of them, in my opinion, is the one by Sidney Shapiro, who was born in Brooklyn, became a naturalized citizen of China, and lived to the ripe old age of 99. He died only a few years ago, in 2014. He spent nearly 50 years working for the state-run Foreign Languages Press in China, translating various works of Chinese literature. His translation of the Water Margin was published in 1980 and is highly regarded. And that is the version I'm using as reference as I work on this podcast. You'll also find several other translations, including a couple in the 1930s, done by Pearl S. Buck and J.H. Jackson. There is also a more recent translation that was completed in 2004 by Alex and John Dent-Young.

Oh, and while we're on the subject of different versions of the novel, there are multiple Chinese versions of the novel, spanning 70, 100, or 120 chapters. The difference mainly lies on the back end of the book, and the front end, where the best action is, is pretty much the same. For the podcast, I'm going with the 100-chapter version, because that's the one I grew up on and am the most familiar with.

Next, I want to talk a little bit about the historical era in which the novel is set. The novel was written in the 1300s, but it's set in the early 1100s. It's believed that the novel is based on material from a fictional work called "Events from the Xuanhe (1,2) Era of the Song Dynasty." That work was written during the Southern Song Dynasty, which followed the Northern Song Dynasty and ran from 1127 to 1279. The events and people it discusses, though, are from the Xuanhe Era, which spans the few years immediately before the fall of the Northern Song. Chinese emperors like to give names to various

periods of their reign to signify either important events that occurred or as an expression of a desire for something, whether it be peace or prosperity. In this case, the Xuanhe (1,2) era could be translated as the Era of Announcing Peace, which is a little ironic. It comprised the years 1119 to 1125 in the reign of the Huizong (1,1) emperor. I'm going to first talk a little bit about the Northern Song Dynasty in general, and then I'll zoom in on the Huizong emperor.

The Song Dynasty lasted 319 years and was split into two major periods, the Northern Song and the Southern Song. The Northern Song ran from 960 to 1127, and the Southern Song ran from 1127 to 1279. The Song Dynasty followed more than seven decades of division and infighting within the Chinese empire. Under the Song, most of China was once again united into one entity.

Beyond just restoring prolonged peace to most of the empire, the Song also represented an economic and cultural golden age for China. Agriculture, commerce, industry, and the arts all flourished and reached unprecedented heights. As we progress through the story in our podcast, I'll do some supplemental episodes from time to time, looking at various aspects of Chinese society under the Song. But suffice it to say, for significant chunks of its existence, the Song Dynasty was about as good a time to be living in China as there ever was.

There's a famous painting from the Northern Song Dynasty, called *Along the River during the Qing Ming Festival*. I have included a link to a copy of this painting with the script for this episode on the podcast website, so go check it out there if you are interested. This painting was a literal panorama of daily life during the Song Dynasty. It's only about 10 inches tall but 207 inches wide. It depicts life in a prosperous Chinese city, which most people believe to be the Song capital. What's fascinating about this painting is the many layers of intricate details it contains. There are large scenes made up of dozens of mini vignettes. In all, the painting contains 814 humans, 60 animals, 30 buildings, 28 boats, 20 vehicles, 8

sedan chairs, and 170 trees. The link I'm including goes to a copy of the scroll with markers highlighting many points of interest, so definitely take a look.

To me, one of the most interesting things about the Water Margin is that it provides a kind of a literary equivalent to this painting. As you progress through the novel, a vivid picture of life in all levels of society during this time is unrolled before your eyes. Sure, the story has emperors and courtiers and wealthy aristocrats and elites. But there are also rank-and-file soldiers, low-level cops, pickpockets, merchants, blacksmiths, butchers, brewers, shopkeepers, innkeepers, restaurateurs, professors, farmers, hunters, monks, priests, scribes, singing girls, fishermen, and many many more. Seemingly every profession makes an appearance somewhere in this book, and we are presented with a vibrant portrait of life from the Song Dynasty, or at least as it was conceived some 200 years later. That alone is one of the major reasons I want to do this podcast.

Next, I'm going to talk a little bit about the Huizong (1,1) emperor, during whose reign the novel was set. He was the eighth emperor of the Song Dynasty. Now, Huizong is just his posthumous title as emperor. His actual name was Zhao (4) Ji (2), with Zhao (4) being the family name. Zhao Ji (2) was born in the year 1082 and came to the throne at the age of 18. But his ascension was not planned. He was the 11th son of the Shenzong (2,1) emperor, and one of his elder brothers became emperor upon their father's death. With the emperorship typically being passed down from father to son, and with the new emperor being in the prime of his life, few would have guessed that Zhao Ji (2) would have much of a shot at the throne.

But the new emperor died in the year 1100 at the tender age of 23, and he left no son. So the line of succession was going to fall to one of his brothers. The eldest of the remaining brothers would have been first in line for this, except he was plagued by an eye ailment. Eventually, the court, with the

support of the empress dowager, settled on Zhao Ji (2) as the next leader of the empire. And so he became Emperor Huizong in the year 1100.

In retrospect, Huizong was known for two things: being a bohemian emperor and letting the poop hit the fan as far as the empire was concerned. I'll talk about the bohemian part first. Huizong was famous for his love of the arts, as well as his own artistic talents. During his reign, the arts occupied a position of supreme importance. In fact, painting became one aspect of the national imperial exam system through which scholars could earn government positions. Huizong was also known for his own paintings, poetry, music, and calligraphy. In fact, his calligraphy style was deemed one of the best in the land.

Beyond his love of the arts, Huizong also had a love for soft living. He engaged in numerous extravagant construction projects, building pleasure gardens and palaces for himself. This aspect of his reign, in fact, gets mentioned in the story and puts into motion various parts of the plot. He was also known for his love of high-class prostitutes or courtesans.

All this love of the arts and soft living had their down side. Huizong turned out to be a pretty lousy emperor when it came to running a country. He trusted some corrupt and inept officials, and his extravagant lifestyle imposed significant hardships on enough of the population that it spurred various peasant uprisings. One group of these rebels, in fact, was the inspiration for the Water Margin. Huizong also made decisions that destabilized foreign relations with his empire's closest neighbors.

In the end, it was during the final years of his reign that the Northern Song dynasty came crashing down. The empire was invaded by the neighboring kingdom of Jin (1) from the North. The Jin went so far as to sack the Song capital, and they captured Huizong and his son. And both of them, in fact, lived out the rest of their lives in the kingdom of Jin as prisoners. The House of Song, meanwhile, lost its northern

territories and retrenched in the South, starting the much weaker Southern Song Dynasty. Huizong's ignominious fate prompted a later historian to remark that, quote, "Huizong was good at everything except being emperor."

But Huizong's fall is beyond the scope of the Water Margin. The novel ends about five years before the invasion of the Jin. So for the purpose of this podcast, we're not going to get into that. If you're interested in learning more about the Huizong emperor, there is a four-part series on him over at Lazzlo Montgomery's excellent China History Podcast. I have included a link to that with the show notes.

Finally, I want to give you an idea of what to expect logistically from this podcast. This is not my day job. It's a passion project, so I have to proceed at a pace that makes it sustainable and keeps me from burning out. So here's how it will go. I will publish one episode a week for three straight weeks, and then I'll take a week off. After that, I'll start the cycle again. This is the schedule I used for most of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast, and it worked well enough that I'm going to keep it. Of course, I reserve the right to make adjustments on the fly if unforeseen events pop up. All in all, we are probably looking at this being a three-year project. I am wholly committed to finishing what I start, so going at a reasonable pace to avoid burnout is important.

Second, be sure to check out the podcast's website, outlawsofthemarsh.com. In addition to the audio files for each episode, you'll find the transcripts, as well as links to resources that will help you keep track of the many characters and places we will mention as we go. Again, that's outlawsofthemarsh.com.

Third, this is a book about bandits and outlaws doing bandit and outlaw things, so as might be expected, there is some salty language involved. I'm going to do my best to keep it fairly clean, but there may be times when I do keep some of the colorful language because, hey, these are outlaws talking, not

Confucian scholars. Still, I'm pretty confident in saying that there won't be F-bombs, but there may be an occasional damn or frak. Also, there are lots and lots of violence and definitely some less-than-progressive views on women, none of which I condone, but all of which ARE part of the story. So just beware in case you are listening to this with your kids.

And finally, if you have any questions, thoughts, or comments, feel free to send them to me at john@chineselore.com. I'm also on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Links to all these are on the website, outlawsofthemarsh.com. I love to hear from listeners, so please do write. And if you like what you are hearing, please help spread the word about the podcast and give it a rating in iTunes or the Apple Podcasts app on your phone. Ratings on other apps are appreciated, too, but really, the iTunes or Apple Podcast rating is the most important one, since that's where a large segment of podcast listeners discover new shows.

Alright, I think that's enough information to get us started. I hope you will join us as we dive into the novel on the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!