

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 2.

Last time, I laid out some background information to give you some context for the novel. This week, we dive into the narrative. Now, I mentioned last week that the novel is set in the reign of the Huizong (1,1) emperor, sometime in the years 1119-1125. But to start us off, we are actually going to go back four emperors and about 60 years, to late in the reign of the Renzong (2,1) emperor in the year 1058.

The Renzong emperor sat on the throne for 42 years, from 1022 to 1063, and his reign was generally considered a time of prosperity. But late in his reign, something went wrong.

Early on the third day of the third month of the year 1058, the Renzong emperor held court as usual. He sat down in his throne and the court officials bowed. Then the chief of ceremonies declared, "If you have business to report, then do so now; otherwise, court will be adjourned." Cause, you know, the emperor has to get back to his busy life of leisure.

But on this day, there WAS business. From the ranks of the officials stepped forth the prime minister and his deputy. They told the emperor, "A plague is raging in the capital, and countless civilians and soldiers have fallen victim to the disease. We hope your majesty, in your forgiving and benevolent spirit, will reduce prison sentences and cut taxes, so as to pray to heaven for relief for the people."

Now, you might be scratching your head and wondering what tax cuts and criminal justice reform have to do with combatting a public health crisis. Well, tax cuts and amnesties were considered acts of kindness and mercy, things that could curry favor with heaven in the hopes of securing good fortune. Emperors would often do things like that on special occasions like naming an heir or, in this case, when there's trouble brewing. So the Renzong emperor immediately told the Hanlin (4,2) Academy to write up a draft decree, proclaiming a general amnesty for all prisoners and canceling all taxes.

The Hanlin Academy, by the way, was a government institution that started in the 8th century. It was a group of elite scholars, and one of their most important jobs was to decide on the official interpretation of Chinese classics, which then set the tone for the imperial examinations through which

aspiring scholars earned government offices. Basically, if you wanted a government job, you needed to toe the official line for how the classics were interpreted. But another part of the Hanlin Academy's job was to basically serve as the emperor's communications department, writing up and sending out his proclamations and decrees. So, imagine if the president of the United States put together a government office comprised of Nobel Laureates in Literature, and they had the power to decide how Mark Twain should be taught in schools, and at the same time they served as glorified secretaries and wrote the president's speeches, emails, and tweets. ... Of course, now that I think about it, that might not be such a bad idea these days.

Anyway, the decrees were written and sent out, the prisoners were released, the taxes were canceled, and yet, for reasons totally beyond me, the plague stubbornly refused to stop. This concerned the emperor greatly. So he summoned his officials and asked them, "Ok, the giant tax cut did NOT lead to better health care outcomes like you promised. So what's your plan B?"

Another official now stepped forth and said, "The plague is decimating our soldiers and citizens. No one is safe. In my humble opinion, in order to end this pestilence, your majesty should summon the Divine Teacher of the Daoists, who is part of a papal line that dates back to the Han Dynasty. Ask him to come to the capital right away and conduct a great prayer service in the imperial park. That will save the people."

[Sigh] Ok, I see we're really earning our paychecks this month. But since that was the only idea presented, the emperor took up the suggestion and ordered his secretaries in the Hanlin Academy to write up an edict to summon the Divine Teacher, which the emperor then signed. He also issued a bunch of royal incense sticks with the decree. Now the emperor needed someone to go find this Divine Teacher, deliver the decree, and bring him back to the capital. For this job, the emperor tapped a marshal named Hong (2) Xin (4).

Now, during the Song Dynasty, a marshal was a military post, but it was often held by people who were NOT soldiers. The founder of the Song Dynasty was a general under the previous regime, and he came to power when his troops ... umm ... spontaneously declared him emperor while they were out on campaign. So from the beginning, the rulers of the Song Dynasty were paranoid about the military taking matters into its own hands again, so they put the military under the command of civil officials. So when you hear me mention Marshal so and so in this novel, instead of picturing a seasoned soldier who rose through the ranks of the army on the strength of his military service, you should picture a scholar or, worse, a good-for-nothing who attained his post by currying favor with the right people.

Anyway, back to the story. So this Marshal Hong (2) was ordered to go to Dragon and Tiger Mountain in the prefecture of Xinzhou (4,1), where he was to present the decree to the Divine Teacher, a certain Priest Zhang (1), and bring him back to the capital to perform the necessary prayer service. The emperor lit some imperial incense in court and personally handed Marshal Hong the decree. Marshal Hong dared not dally, so he immediately took his leave and set out with a few dozen men. His attendants carried the decree and a golden box containing the imperial incense sticks. He mounted his horse and his party set out.

Now, when government officials traveled, they had state guesthouses to stay in along the way, so Marshal Hong and his entourage had their accommodations taken care of throughout the trip. After a few days' travel, they arrived at their destination, and all the local officials came to welcome this envoy from the imperial court. A messenger was dispatched to the Temple of Supreme Purity on the mountain to let the abbot and other Daoists there know that, hey you've got a VIP coming, so roll out the red carpet.

The next day, the local officials accompanied Marshal Hong to the foot of the mountain, and there, they saw a flock of Daoists descending from the temple. They were beating drums and ringing bells, playing saintly music, bearing incense and candles, and hoisting banners and canopies as they came to

welcome Marshal Hong. Together, they traveled up the mountain to the temple, which was truly impressive.

All the Daoists in the temple, from the presiding abbot to the lowliest novice, came to welcome the imperial envoy and escorted him to the Hall of Three Purities. There, they asked him to place the royal edict on an altar. This done, Marshal Hong asked where the Divine Teacher was.

To this, the abbot answered, "Marshal, you must understand, our current Divine Teacher is known as 'Pure Serenity.' He is of a very exalted nature and cannot be bothered with such mundane matters as welcoming and seeing off visitors. He has built a thatched hut atop the mountain to meditate and cultivate his spirit. That is why he doesn't live in this temple."

"Well, I have an imperial edict for him, so how do I get an audience?" Marshal Hong asked.

"Please leave the edict on the altar, and none of us will dare to read it anyway," the abbot said.

"Please come to the abbey for some tea, and then we can figure it out."

So the entourage now moved into the abbey, where the marshal sat down in the middle, and attendants served up tea and vegetarian dishes. After the meal, the marshal once again asked the abbot, "Since the Divine Teacher is in his hut atop the mountain, why don't we send someone to invite him to come down to receive the edict?"

"Sir," the abbot replied, "our Divine Teacher IS at the top of the mountain, but he has an unusual knowledge of the Way. He can ride the clouds and mists, and no one knows his exact whereabouts. Even we rarely get to see him, so how can any of us get him to come down?"

And by the way, being in touch with the Way was kind of the whole point of Daoism. In fact the Dao in Daoism means the Way, and it was believed that if you were really in touch with the Way, you could do magical things like fly or make things turn into other things or live to an extraordinary age. So it's kind of like being in touch with the Force.

Anyway, Marshal Hong was not going to take no for an answer. He had to answer to the emperor, after all.

“Then how do I get to see him?!” he said, starting to lose his patience. “A plague is raging in the capital, and his majesty has sent me to deliver an edict to invite the Divine Teacher to perform a great prayer service to quell the pestilence and save the people. What can I do?”

The abbot told him, “To help his majesty save the people, you must demonstrate your piety. Eat no meat, bathe, and change into simple cotton garments. Then, carry the edict on your back, carry burning incense, and proceed up the mountain on foot alone. There, bow and proclaim your invitation aloud. Then maybe you will get to see the Divine Teacher. But if you are not sincere, then your trip will be in vain, and you will not get to see him.”

“I have been eating vegetarian meals since I left the capital,” Marshal Hong grumbled. “Isn’t that sincere enough? Fine, I’ll do as you suggest and go up the mountain tomorrow.”

At 5 a.m. the next morning, the Daoists got up and prepared scented water and a vegetarian meal for Marshal Hong. He bathed in the scented water, and then changed into a new cotton garment and strapped on straw sandals. After the vegetarian meal, he wrapped the imperial edict in a piece of yellow silk and strapped it across his back. In his hand he carried smoking incense in a silver incense burner. The Daoists then accompanied him to the mountain behind the temple and pointed him in the right direction.

“If you wish to save the people, you must not harbor any regrets or thoughts of giving up,” the abbot told him. “Just press forward piously.”

Taking his leave of everyone, the marshal said a prayer for divine assistance and began his solo ascent. The winding path seemingly led up toward the sky, through a mountain that truly seemed like

the sanctuary of immortals, shrouded in mists, with awe-inspiring cliffs, babbling brooks, and strange rock formations.

Marshal Hong forged ahead, climbing over hills and fighting his way through the twisting, overgrown path, undeterred by the difficult journey ahead and wholly committed to his cause as his figure began to fade into the distance ... oh wait, no, he's slowing down, a lot.

Barely a mile into his pilgrimage, Marshal Hong's legs and feet were already getting sore, and he was starting to stagger. He didn't complain out loud, but in his mind, he was thinking, "I am an important official of the court. In the capital, I slept on double mattresses and dined on banquet dishes. Even then I didn't have much energy. What the hell am I doing out here in straw sandals, climbing this mountain? Who knows where the hell that Divine Teacher is? Why do I have to suffer?"

Nonetheless, he staggered on. The things we do to save millions of plague victims, you know? But another 50 steps or so, and he was doubled over and panting hard.

Just then, a strong wind blew through the hollow he was in, and when it passed, a roar thundered from behind the pine trees, and a giant tiger with bulging eyes, a white forehead, and striped fur leaped out.

"Oh crap!" a stunned Marshal Hong cried out as he tumbled backward onto the ground, while the tiger, glowering with fangs and claws, circled with eyes fixed squarely on this human who was obviously in no shape to run away.

And then, the tiger let out a mighty roar and bounded off down the rear slope, leaving Marshal Hong sitting under a tree, with his teeth chattering and his heart clanging like 15 buckets swinging up and down in a single well. His pulse might have been racing, but his body was paralyzed, and his legs were as

limp as a rooster that just lost a cock fight. The only thing running was his mouth as he just kept muttering oh crap oh crap oh crap.

It was a long while after the tiger had disappeared before Marshal Hong managed to pull himself to his feet. He picked up the incense burner off the ground, relit the incense, and continued his ascent, for which I have to give him some credit. Of course, he complained about it the whole way, grumbling, "If the emperor had not sent me on this mission with a deadline, I would not have suffered such a fright!"

But he had barely finished grumbling when suddenly, another strong gust of wind swept through, blasting him with foul-smelling air. In that moment, Marshal Hong heard a loud hiss, and he saw a giant snake, as thick as a bucket and dappled with snow-white spots, slithering toward him from a bamboo grove.

"I'm done for!" Marshal Hong cried as he dropped the incense burner and fell backward next to a spiral-shaped rock.

The giant serpent quickly slithered toward the rock and twisted itself into a coil. Golden sparks shot from its eyes as it opened its mouth and flicked its tongue. Marshal Hong could feel another gust of noxious fumes hitting him in the face, leaving him so terrified that it was as though his soul had left his body.

And yet, just like with the tiger, the giant snake took a close look at this hapless human and then slithered down the mountain side and disappeared. Only then did Marshal Hong get to his feet.

"Lucky me," he thought. "That snake nearly scared me to death!"

Feeling goose bumps all over his body from his close encounter, Marshal Hong now started to curse the abbot of the temple. "How rude of him to play such tricks on me and scare me like this! If I can't find the Divine Teacher, that abbot will be hearing from me when I go back down."

Nonetheless, the mission remained, and Marshal Hong picked up his incense burner, straightened up his clothes and his bundle with the edict inside, and prepared to resume his journey. But just then, he heard another sound coming from behind the pine trees. Oh crap. Now what?

Actually, this one was NOT so threatening. It was the melody of a flute, drifting closer and closer. The marshal looked in the direction of the music and saw a Daoist novice, just a boy, riding backward on atop a yellow ox, playing a metal flute with a wide grin on his face.

“Hey boy, where are you from? Do you recognize me?” Marshal Hong called out to the kid.

But the boy ignored him and just kept playing his flute. The marshal called him a few more times before the kid burst out laughing and pointed at him with the flute.

“Are you here to see the Divine Teacher?” the boy asked.

Surprised, Marshall Hong said, “You are just a young cowherd. How do you know such things?”

Smiling, the boy said, “I was attending the Divine Teacher in his hut earlier, and I heard him say, ‘The Renzong Emperor has sent a Marshal Hong with an edict and incense to this mountain. He is summoning me to go perform a great prayer service to save the land from a pestilence. I will ride a crane and fly there.’”

“I figure he must have left already,” the boy continued, “so he’s not here. Don’t go any farther. There are lots of poisonous creatures and ferocious beasts in this mountain that can kill you.”

“You better not be lying to me,” Marshal Hong said.

The boy chuckled and gave no reply, instead just continuing on his way while playing his flute, disappearing around a hillside.

Marshal Hong now thought to himself, “How could that kid know so much about such matters? The Divine Teacher must have told him to do so. That must be it.”

So now, he had a choice to make. Keeping going up or turn back like the boy suggested. With his close encounters with the tiger and the snake still fresh on his mind, the boy’s words were all the reason



Marshal Hong needed to turn back. So he retraced his steps and descended the mountain. The Daoists greeted him at the foot of the mountain and escorted him back to the abbey. Once he sat down, the abbot asked him whether he met the Divine Teacher. And that's when Marshal tore him a new one.

"I am an important court official!" Marshal Hong seethed. "How could you have me traverse mountain paths and endure such hardship? I almost got killed! I got midway up the mountain, and a giant tiger jumped out, scaring me out of my boots. Then, a giant snake stormed out of the bamboo groves, wound itself into a coil, and blocked my path. I'm lucky to make it back alive! You Daoists are playing a trick on me!"

"Sir, how would we dare to show any disrespect to a high official?" the abbot said. "That was the Divine Teacher testing you. This mountain does have snakes and tigers, but they have never harmed anyone."

Marshal Hong now continued his story. "I was struggling to go on but was just about to press forward when a boy novice came out from behind some pine trees, riding a yellow ox and blowing on a flute. I asked him if he knew who I was, and he said he knew all about me and that the Divine Teacher said he was leaving for the capital this morning on a crane. That's why I came back down."

When the abbot heard this, he told the marshal, "Sir, you missed your chance! That cowherd IS the Divine Teacher."

Huh? Come again?

"How can that rustic little boy be the Divine Teacher?" an astonished Marshal Hong asked.

"This Divine Teacher is extremely unusual," the abbot explained. "He may be young, but his command of the Way is remarkable. He is extraordinary. He can appear in any guise he wishes, and people call him the Master of the Way."

"I saw him with my own eyes and did not recognize him. What a missed opportunity!" Marshal Hong lamented.

“Sir, don’t worry,” the abbot consoled him. “Since the Divine Teacher said he was going, then by the time you return to the capital, he would have finished the prayer service.”

That put Marshal Hong’s mind at ease, and the abbot now ordered a meal prepared for him. They stored the imperial edict in a casket for royal documents for safekeeping in the Hall of Three Purities, and then burned the imperial incense in the hall. Then, they feasted deep into the night, vegetarian-style, before Marshal Hong turned in.

The next morning after breakfast, the abbot and other Daoists at the abbey invited Marshal Hong to take a sightseeing tour of the premises. Now THIS was walking that he was happy to do, and who can say no to a little fun excursion on a business trip? So the entourage set out, led by two novices. Marshal Hong and his people oohed and ahed as they toured the various impressive halls and walkways on the temple grounds.

Later on the tour, the group moved to the rear of the walkway on the right side of the temple. There, Marshal Hong spotted a building with walls as red as peppers, and vermilion-colored lattice work on its two front windows. The front double doors, though, were clamped shut by a lock as thick as a man’s arm, and a dozen strips of paper had been pasted over the seam between the two doors. The papers were stamped with countless red seals. Below the front eaves hung a red plaque inscribed with characters of gold, which read, “The Hall of Suppressed Demons.”

“What is this place?” Marshal Hong asked.

“A previous Divine Teacher locked demons in there,” the abbot replied.

“What’s with all the paper on the doors?”

“After that Divine Teacher locked the demons in there, every Divine Teacher since then has personally added a strip of paper to seal the doors, warning their disciples that they must not open the doors. It would be terrible if the demons escaped. The last eight or nine generations of Divine Teachers

have sworn to keep the hall closed. The lock has been filled with melted bronze. Who knows what's going on inside? I have been in charge here for 30 years, and yet I only know what I've been told."

Now, if I was a superstitious man living in 12th-century China and I came upon a locked building called the Hall of Suppressed Demons with a bunch of keep-out and no-trespassing signs, and I'm told that the building does exactly what its name says, my inclination would be to just leave well enough alone and move on. But Marshal Hong had other ideas. His curiosity had been piqued, and it demanded satisfaction.

"Open the door; I want to see what the demons look like," he told the abbot.

"Sir! This hall MUST not be opened!" the abbot said. "The previous Divine Teacher had decreed that no one may open it."

"Nonsense," Marshal Hong said with a laugh. "Y'all are just making up lies to trick the people. You're making claims about taming demons to make your sect's powers look good. I have read many books and have never seen anything about taming demons. Spirits only inhabit the nether regions. I don't believe there are any demons inside! Open it at once and let me see the demons."

But the abbot kept pleading, telling the marshal that if the doors were opened, there were going to be bad consequences and people were going to get hurt. But by now, the marshal had grown weary of hearing no and he started to throw his weight around. He pointed at the Daoists and said, "If you don't open the doors for me, then when I get back to court, I will tell his majesty that you Daoists prevented me from delivering the imperial edict and refused to let me see the Divine Teacher. Then I will tell his majesty that you have set up this building to perpetuate a lie about demons to deceive the people. I'll have your religious orders canceled and have all of you branded as criminals and exiled to some distant land."

Well, the guy was a court official, and the abbot knew when to change his tune. So he summoned a few members of the temple who worked as blacksmiths. They first peeled off the pieces of paper, and then they broke the lock. The doors were pushed open, and the entourage peered inside and saw ... nothing but darkness.

The group stepped gingerly into the hall. It was pitch black and you couldn't even see your hands. The marshal ordered his men to fetch a dozen or so torches. When these were lit, they saw that the hall was empty, except for a stone tablet in the center. It stood about 6 feet high and sat atop a stone statue of a turtle, which had sunken halfway into the damp earthen floor. On the front of the tablet were mystical scripts and signs and symbols that no one could understand. Marshal Hong then walked around to the other side, and there, he saw four words on the back of the tablet: "Open when Hong comes."

Well, ain't this a coincidence? Marshal Hong, of course, did not believe in coincidences. He was delighted and said to the abbot, "You all tried to stop me, but look, how did my name end up here hundreds of years ago? It says, 'Open when Hong comes.' Clearly I am meant to open this, so what's the problem?! I think the demon must be under the stone tablet. Go get a few more blacksmiths and have them dig it out."

"Sir, we must not disturb this!" the abbot pleaded again. "Or it could cause great harm. It's not safe."

Wait, I'm sorry. Did you, a meager Daoist priest, just say no to me, an official of the imperial court? Marshal Hong did not take kindly to this, and he shouted, "What do you Daoists know?! The tablet clearly says it should be opened when I come. Why are you trying to stop me?! Go get the men I asked for!"

The abbot tried time and again to talk the marshal out of this, but to no avail. So the abbot had no choice but to get some people together. They first laid the tablet down on its side, and then they started digging out the stone turtle statue. It took a lot of digging before they got the thing out. And then, they

started digging into the soil underneath it. After about 3 or 4 feet, they discovered a large stone slab some 10 square feet wide. Marshal Hong wanted this dug up as well, much to the chagrin of everyone who, you know, actually had to do the digging. Their objections were noted and ignored, and so they lifted up the slab.

Under the slab was a seemingly bottomless pit. As soon the workmen removed the slab, a great ripping sound was heard, and a black cloud shot up out of the pit, accompanied by a sound that seemed to make the heaven and earth tremble. This cloud tore through a corner of the roof and whooshed into the sky, where it broke up into more than a hundred golden rays that shimmered and then dissipated in every direction.

Screaming in fear, everyone threw down their tools and scampered out of the hall, running over each other along the way. Marshal Hong himself was goggle-eyed with mouth agape and a face the color of ash. He ran out to the porch, where he found the abbot bemoaning ... whatever it was that just happened.

“What demon was it that just escaped?” a breathless Marshal Hong asked.

Uhh, maybe you should have asked that BEFORE you insisted we tear down the DO NOT OPEN signs, knock over a tablet, dig up a stone turtle, and lift up the slab of rock that covered a bottomless pit?

To see what demon it was that had just escaped, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!