

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 3.

Before we get started, I just want to remind you to visit the podcast website at outlawsofthemarsh.com, where you will find supplemental materials such as transcripts, maps, and a list of characters for each episode. Once again, that's outlawsofthemarsh.com. Also, be sure to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts, and if you like the show, please leave us a rating to help others discover it. Thanks!

Last time, with the capital in the grips of a devastating plague, the Renzong emperor had sent a Marshal Hong (2) to go summon a divine Daoist priest to perform a prayer service. Marshal Hong stumbled around a sacred mountain for a bit, had a couple close calls with some local wildlife, and totally did not recognize the priest he was sent to fetch when he came across the guy, or rather, the boy.

But somehow the mission got accomplished, and to celebrate, Marshal Hong decided to take a little tour of the Daoist temple at the foot of the mountain. He came across a building called the Hall of Suppressed Demons and was told that it was a hall where, well, demons had been suppressed and locked up for hundreds of years. Ignoring the many, many warning signs on the doors, not to mention the giant lock and the pleas of the temple's abbot, Marshal Hong insisted on breaking into the building and digging into the ground until something interesting happened.

Well, he got his wish. Something did happen: They found a bottomless pit, and a black cloud promptly shot out from it, crashed through the roof, climbed into the sky, and then broke up into a hundred-some beams of light and disappeared.

Uhh, I'm guessing that's not good? Marshal Hong asked the abbot.

"Sir," the abbot explained, "a previous Divine Teacher had left a written warning on this hall. It said, 'A total of 108 demons -- including 36 stars of Heavenly Spirits and 72 stars of Earthly Fiends -- are locked inside the hall. Their names were inscribed on the stone tablet in a mystical script to hold them

down. If they are released on earth, they will cause no end of trouble.' And now you have let them out. What are we going to do?! There is going to be trouble!"

Uhh ... umm ... oh boy. Marshal Hong was now covered in cold sweat, realizing what he had just done, against the advice of everyone present. And his solution? Get the hell out of dodge. He immediately packed his bags and set off for the capital with his entourage. Back at the temple, once the marshal left, the abbot and the other Daoists repaired the hall and resurrected the stone tablet, patching up the barn AFTER the horses had left.

As for Marshal Hong, on his way back to the capital, he instructed his men that they were not to say a word to anyone about the whole unleashing-beasts-of-hell-upon-the-world thing. A few days later, they arrived at the capital, and as they were entering the city, they heard people talking about how the Divine Teacher had performed 7 days and 7 nights of prayer services at the imperial park and handed out many charms. And just like that, the sick had been cured, and the plague had disappeared. The Divine Teacher had taken his leave and flown back to his mountain via crane Uber, where his abbot probably assured him that nothing had gone amiss in his absence, and no, that's not a new roof on the hall of demons.

The next morning, Marshal Hong went to court and told the emperor, "The Divine Teacher departed for the capital on his crane, and we returned by land and just arrived." Oh, and we certainly did not release any demons that had been locked up for centuries, just in case you were wondering. Having completed his mission, Marshal Hong was handsomely rewarded by the Renzong emperor and returned to his old job.

Now, you just KNOW that something like releasing 108 demons into the world would come back to bite Marshal Hong in the rear. And you would be ... wrong. In fact, nothing seemed to have come of it as

the days went by. Soon, the days turned into weeks. The weeks turned into months, and the months turned into years, and a few years later, the Renzong emperor died. All his sons had died by that point, too, so the throne passed to a younger male relative, who reigned for a mere 4 years before kicking the bucket himself. The throne then passed to that guy's son, who reigned for 18 years before dying and leaving the throne to his son, who was known as the Zhezong (2,1) emperor.

Zhezong came to the throne in the year 1085. So at this point, it had been 23 years since Marshal Hong had his little oopsie, and for all we know, Marshal Hong himself was probably already dead, too. No demons had reared their ugly heads. In fact, there was peace throughout the empire and all was well.

And that brings us to the end of the novel. Thanks for listening!

Ok, actually, that just brings us to the end of of the beginning. Yep, everything for the last episode plus was just the prologue to the real story.

So where do we begin the real story? How about the Prefecture of Kaifeng (1,1)? This was the imperial capital, the seat of power, the home of emperors, ministers, generals, and well-to-do elites, not to mention about 700,000 people. And out of all those, we are going to talk about a single man, a total nobody. In fact, not just a nobody, but a nobody who was a real piece of crap. His last name was Gao (1), and he was the second oldest son in his family. Ever since childhood, he had no interest in anything useful. He just liked to play around with spears and staffs, but not in a serious way that would make him a worthwhile fighter. No, what he was really good at was football. No, I don't mean American football, or soccer for that matter. In ancient China, they played a game called cuju (4,1). The game was first mentioned in relation to the Warring States period, which ran from 481 BC to 221 BC. So by the time of the Song Dynasty, it had been played for something like 1500 years. But it was during the Song dynasty that the game became really popular and spread to every class of society.

So as I was saying, this guy, Gao the Second, as he was called, was really good at this ancient game of football. In fact, he was so good at it, that people stopped calling him Gao the Second, and instead called him Gao Qiu (2). Now, this was an interesting play on words. The character Qiu means ball, and his family name, Gao, means high or superior. So “Gao Qiu” essentially means something like “Superball.”

Aside from knowing how to ball and knowing which end of a weapon to hold, this Gao Qiu was also versed in singing, dancing, playing music, writing poetry and prose. Now, you may think, what’s the problem with knowing how to ball, being a bit of a Bohemian, and having a nickname like Superball? Well, by the standards of the times, plenty. Gao Qiu wasn’t some elite scholar pursuing the arts for personal refinement. He was just some riff raff dabbling in games and merrymaking instead of holding down an honest, steady job, and that was generally scorned. And what’s worse, while he knew plenty about how to have a good time, he knew nothing of concepts like compassion, honor, propriety, loyalty, or trustworthiness.

So what does a man like that do for a living? Well, Gao Qiu spent his days roaming the streets as a groupie and a ... umm ... helper. For instance, he “helped” the son of Mr. Wang the iron-shop owner blow through a ton of money at the theaters, gambling dens, and brothels. It got so bad that Mr. Wang went to the magistrate and lodged a complaint against Gao Qiu. The magistrate had no qualms about bringing down the hammer on this riff raff. Gao Qiu was sentenced to a beating, 40 strokes on his back to be exact. And then he was exiled from the capital. No one in the city was allowed to take him in.

So Gao Qiu had no choice but to pack his bundle and leave. He went to the west side of the Huai (2) River, to Linhuai (2,2) Prefecture. There, he offered his services to one Liu (3) the Eldest. This Mr. Liu ran a gambling establishment, and he loved surrounding himself with idlers and riff raffs from all over, since, well, I guess you can never have too many such men in a gambling house. So Gao Qiu ended up staying with Mr. Liu (3) for three years.

Toward the end of those three years, Gao Qiu's luck began to turn. The emperor had prayed to heaven for good weather for the harvest, and he got what he asked for. So, to show his gratitude for heaven's kindness, the emperor issued a general amnesty. So Gao Qiu's sentence was commuted and he could go home again.

His host, Mr. Liu (3), had a relative in the capital, a certain Mr. Dong (3) who ran a medicinal herb shop near the Bridge of Golden Girders. So Mr. Liu wrote a recommendation letter for Gao Qiu, asking Mr. Dong to take him in.

So Gao Qiu packed his bundle and returned to the capital, whereupon he indeed visited Mr. Dong and presented the letter. Mr. Dong read the letter, took one look at Gao Qiu, and immediately recognized what kind of man he was getting.

Mr. Dong thought to himself, "How can I take such a man into my home? If he were an honest man, then at least he could be a good role model for the kids. But he's a riff raff, an untrustworthy man. He was also an exiled criminal. If I let him stay here, he'll corrupt the kids. But if I don't let him stay, then it won't look good with Liu (3) the Eldest."

So Mr. Dong put on a happy face and told Gao Qiu he was welcome to stay for a while. For the next 10 days or so, Mr. Dong treated Gao Qiu to wine and food. Then, an idea came to Mr. Dong. He gave Gao Qiu a set of clothes and a recommendation letter and told him, "My home is like the light of a firefly -- too feeble to shine a spotlight on you. I would only be holding you back. So I am going to recommend you to Su (1) Junior, the Court Scholar. You will have opportunities there. What do you think?"

Wait, so I'm going from gambling den to pharmacy to the service of a court scholar? Needless to say, Gao Qiu was delighted. He thanked Mr. Dong (3) and packed his bundle, and Mr. Dong sent a man to take him to see Scholar Su (1). The doorman at Scholar Su's residence informed his master, who came out, read the recommendation letter, took one look at Gao Qiu, and immediately recognized what kind of man he was getting.

“How can I take such a man into my home?” Scholar Su thought to himself. “I might as well do Mr. Dong (3) a favor and send this guy to be a retainer for Wang (2) Jinqing (4,1), the young prince consort. He likes this sort of people.”

So Scholar Su wrote a reply to Mr. Dong and took Gao Qiu in for the night. The next day, he wrote a recommendation letter and sent an attendant to take Gao Qiu to the prince consort’s residence. This prince consort Wang was married to a younger sister of the emperor. He was a guy who knew how to have a good time, so he was delighted to add Gao Qiu to his entourage, keeping him on as a personal attendant. So, everybody might’ve been playing hot potato with this riff raff, but the riff raff was rapidly climbing the social ladder, and now he was in the sphere of the royal household, coming and going with the prince consort as if he were a member of the family. As the old saying goes, “Distant family grow ever distant, while friends at hand grow closer still.”

Soon, it was the prince consort’s birthday, and to celebrate, he was going to hold a feast. To this party, he invited Prince Duan (1), one of his wife’s younger brothers. This Prince Duan (1) was the 11th son of the previous emperor and a younger brother of the current emperor. He was in charge of the imperial carriage. He was an intelligent, handsome young man, and a dilettante who was skilled in all forms of amusement, be it the lute, chess, calligraphy, painting, music, singing, dancing, or, football.

On the day of the feast, the prince consort laid out a banquet with the finest delicacies from land and sea. He put Prince Duan (1) in the center chair, which was the seat of honor. Then they started drinking and eating. After blowing through a few cups of wine and a couple courses, Prince Duan got up to use the bathroom. On his way back, he stopped into the prince consort’s library. There, he spotted on the desk a pair of lion paperweights carved from fine jade. The craftsmanship was exquisite, and the prince picked them up and could not bear to set them down.

“Beautiful,” he said to himself.

The prince consort had entered the room at that point and heard the prince. No stranger to the art of bootlicking, the prince consort immediately said, "I also have a jade dragon brush rack made by the same artisan who made the paperweights, but I don't have it handy right now. Let me get it out tomorrow and give them all to you as a gift."

This gesture delighted Prince Duan immensely. "Thank you for your kindness!" he said. "I suspect that brush rack will be even better than the lions."

"You can judge for yourself when I send them to your palace tomorrow," the prince consort said. The two of them then returned to the feast and got good and drunk before taking their leave of each other.

The next day, the prince consort found his dragon brush rack and put *it* and the two lion paperweights into a golden box and wrapped the box with a piece of yellow silk. He then wrote a letter and sent Gao Qiu to go deliver the present to the prince. When Gao Qiu arrived at the prince's palace, the doorman informed the steward, who came out and asked Gao Qiu where he was from.

Gao Qiu bowed and said, "I work for the prince consort. I am here to present his highness with some jade objects."

"His highness is playing football with some young eunuchs in the middle courtyard," the steward told him. "You can go see him yourself."

"Please show me the way," Gao Qiu requested.

So the steward took him through the residence and to the courtyard. There, Gao Qiu saw the prince balling with some eunuchs. He was wearing a soft silk hat and a purple robe with an embroidered dragon. The robe had been tucked up in front under his waist sash, and he wore boots with golden embroidered phoenixes.

Gao Qiu did not dare to interrupt the prince's game, so he just stood behind some attendants and waited. Suddenly, one of the players sent the ball soaring through the air. The prince couldn't quite get to it, and the ball rolled to a stop in front of Gao Qiu. With a momentary surge of boldness, Gao Qiu kicked the ball back to the prince with a move known as a "mandarin duck twist."

Impressed and delighted, the prince asked Gao Qiu who he was. Gao Qiu quickly sank to his knees and said, "I am an attendant to prince consort Wang. My master ordered me to deliver these jade objects to your highness. Here is his letter."

"My brother-in-law is always so considerate," the prince said with a smile. He took one look at the jade objects and told a servant to take them away. He had a new, more interesting plaything at the moment.

"So, you know how to play football," he said to Gao Qiu. "What's your name?"

"My name is Gao Qiu. I've picked up a move or two here and there."

"Great! Then join me for a game."

"Who am I to have the audacity to play with your highness?"

"Why not?" the prince insisted. "This is the Clouds-High League, known as the All-Round Circle. It's open to anyone."

And by the way, the Clouds-High League is a sort of a national football association. There are a lot more details about this game, and I'll do a supplemental episode soon to cover that topic, so that we don't have to veer too far from the narrative here to talk about this popular sport.

Anyway, Gao Qiu tried to beg off time and again, but the prince insisted, so Gao Qiu kowtowed to beg forgiveness for his presumption, and then took the field.

He needed just a few kicks to earn a shout of approval from the prince. That inspired Gao Qiu to show off all his skills to impress the prince. He was a natural on the football field, and the ball stuck to

him as if it were glued to his feet, and in a game that emphasized one's ability to control the ball, that was very impressive.

The prince was delighted with his new toy, and there was no way he was going to give him back. So he kept Gao Qiu in his palace overnight. Then, the next day, Prince Duan (1) invited Prince Consort Wang over for a banquet. The prince consort was just wondering where Gao Qiu had been all night. Upon receiving the invitation, he set out at once. He was greeted in front of the palace by the prince himself, and the jovial prince offered effusive thanks for the jade objects.

As the two sat drinking, Prince Duan said, "That Gao Qiu is really good at football. I would like to have him as a personal attendant. Is that ok with you?"

"If your highness has a use for him, then of course, keep him in your palace to serve you," the prince consort replied.

The prince was pleased, and he offered a toast to express his gratitude. The two men then made small talk for a while longer before taking their leave of each other. And so, Gao Qiu had now gone from exile to gambling den to pharmacy to prince consort's residence to a prince's palace. And they say job-hopping doesn't pay off.

Oh, and by the way, somewhere along the way here, once his fortunes began to take a turn for the better, Gao Qiu changed his name. He replaced the original character Qiu, which means ball, with a different character that sounds the same but means "to seek" or to "to pursue". And remember that his family name Gao means high or superior. So instead of Superball, his name now meant something like Superior Pursuits, which was a lot more respectable-sounding.

Having obtained Gao Qiu, Prince Duan (1) adored his company and kept him in the palace. From that day forth, Gao Qiu never ventured half a step away from his master's side. But he was not done going places yet. In fact, he was about to take a HUGE step up.

Less than two months after Gao Qiu became an attendant to Prince Duan, the sitting emperor Zhezong (4,1) died. Zhezong was only in his early 20s, and he left no male heir. After some discussion, the court officials decided to elevate none other than Prince Duan (1) to the throne, and so Prince Duan (1) became the Huizong (1,1) emperor, and if you paid attention during the introduction in episode 1, then you already know that it is in the reign of this Huizong emperor that the bulk of the novel is set.

After Huizong took the throne, all seemed to be going well as the empire kept chugging along. Then one day, out of the blue, he said to Gao Qiu, "I want to promote you, but you will have to render some military service on the borders of the empire first. I will have the Council of Military Affairs put you down as available for imperial appointment, as someone who shall accompany me."

Things moved quickly after that. Within half a year, Gao Qiu was promoted again and again, until he was elevated to the position of a marshal in command of the imperial guard. All this, for a riff raff who had shown no skill other than being good at football and flattery. Remember what I said in episode 2 about these marshals not exactly being veterans of war? Well, Gao Qiu would be a rather egregious example of that. Thank god that in our modern age we no longer appoint wholly unqualified sycophants to important government posts just because the guy at the head of the government enjoys their company.

Having received his appointment, Gao Qiu picked an auspicious date to assume office. On that day, he arrived at the imperial guard headquarters and all the officers of the guard came to pay their respects to the new boss. Everyone showed their work badge and signed the roll to indicate that they were present.

As he examined the roster, Gao Qiu noticed one officer missing: a drill instructor named Wang (2) Jin (4). This Wang Jin had fallen ill a couple weeks earlier and was still recovering at home. But Gao Qiu was like, sick leave? What the hell is that?

“Nonsense!” he said angrily when told that Wang Jin was out sick. “He sent in his badge, didn’t he? How dare he snub me and pretend to be sick at home? This is insubordination! Go bring him here at once!”

Now, this Wang Jin was still single, and he lived at home with no one except his mother, who was in her 60s. That day, one of his fellow officers showed up at his house and told him, “The newly appointed Marshal Gao took office today. When he did the roll call, you weren’t there. The chief of staff explained that you were sick at home, but the marshal lost his patience and refused to believe it. He insisted that we bring you in, saying that you were pretending to be sick. You have to come with me. If you don’t, it would be trouble for everyone. Even I would be punished.”

So Wang Jin had no choice but to stagger out of bed and go into the office. There, he kneeled and kowtowed four times, hailing Gao Qiu with respect, and then stood to one side.

“So you are the son of the former drill instructor Wang Sheng (1)?” Gao Qiu asked.

“Yes, I am.”

Gao Qiu flew into a rage. “You rogue! Your father was a snake oil peddler who waved a stick around. What fighting skills would you know?! My predecessor was blind and made you a drill instructor. How dare you disrespect me and not show up for roll call, and instead stay at home pretending to be sick?!”

“I would never dare!” Wang Jin said, with head bowed. “I really was still recovering.”

“Damn crook! If you are sick, then why are you here now?”

“When you summon me, I would never dare to not show.”

Well, if you couldn’t tell already, there was nothing Wang Jin could have said that would have appeased Gao Qiu. Gao Qiu now grew even angrier and barked for the guards to seize Wang Jin.

“Beat this bastard, hard!”

All the officers were friends with Wang Jin, and they pleaded with Gao Qiu for leniency, telling him, "Today should be an auspicious day for you, so please just spare him this one time."

Alright. I guess beating the staff on day one is a lousy way to ingratiate yourself to them. So Gao Qiu relented. Wang Jin escaped the beating, but got an earful from his new boss, who told him, "You damn crook! I'm only sparing you for now on account of the other officers. I'll deal with you tomorrow!"

Wang Jin thanked Gao Qiu for his, umm, leniency. As he rose to his feet, he looked up for the first time, and his heart sank the moment he saw Gao Qiu's face.

Once he left the office, Wang Jin sighed and said, "It looks like my life is in danger. Turns out this Marshal Gao is that riff raff Gao the Second! When he was learning to joust with staves, he took a blow from my father that left him bedridden for 3 or 4 months. He's been holding a grudge ever since. And now, he's come up in the world and has risen to marshal and commander of the imperial guards, so he's looking for revenge. Who could have expected that I would be under his command? As the old saying goes, 'Fear not officials, except those who officiate over you.' How can I stand up against him? What will I do?"

When he got home that night, Wang Jin was still depressed and he told his mom, and it left both of them in tears.

"My son," his mother said, "the best plan is to leave. But where can we go?"

"You're quite right, mother. That's what I've been thinking, too. The border garrison of Yan'an (2,1) Prefecture is overseen by Old General Zhong (1). Many of his officers have visited the capital and admired my martial skills. Why don't we seek refuge there. That is a place where they need people, so we can make a life for ourselves there."

And so it was settled. Wang Jin and his mother were going to flee. But there was just one slight problem. Headquarters had sent two orderlies to tend to Wang Jin, and they were stationed right

outside the door. Wang Jin's mother worried that if they caught wind of the plan, the whole thing would go bust. But Wang Jin told her not to worry and that he would take care of it.

That evening, Wang Jin summoned one of the two orderlies, a Corporal Zhang.

"Go get some dinner, and then I have an errand for you," Wang Jin told him.

"Where are you sending me?" Corporal Zhang asked.

"When I was sick a few days ago, I vowed that if I recovered, I would burn incense in the Temple of the Sacred Mountain outside Sour Date Gate. I want to go fulfill that vow first thing tomorrow. You will go over there tonight and inform the priest so that he knows to open the temple a little earlier for me tomorrow so that I may be the first worshipper. I want you to go buy the three sacrificial meats. You can spend the night in the temple and wait for me."

And in case you were wondering, the three sacrificial meats that Wang Jin mentioned were ox, sheep, and pig. So Corporal Zhang did as he was told. After dinner, he went and placed the order and then headed to the temple.

That night, Wang Jin and his mother gathered up some clothes, bedding, silks, and silver, and packed them into containers to be carried on a shoulder pole. They also filled up two saddle bags with feed for the horse.

Then, around 5 a.m., Wang Jin summoned the other orderlie, a Corporal Li (3), and told him, "Take this silver to the temple. Help Corporal Zhang cook the sacrificial meats and wait for me there. I'll be along right after I go buy some sacrificial money and candles."

As soon as Corporal Li headed off, Wang Jin prepped the horse, placed the saddle bags on it, and led it out through the back door. Then, he helped his mother onto the horse, and they set off, leaving behind the heavier household items. Wang Jin locked the front and back doors, placed the luggage on the carrying-pole across his shoulder, and mother and son set out in the waning darkness of the early

morn. They slipped out through the West Gate of the capital and headed in the direction of Yan'an (2,1) Prefecture.

To see if they will make a successful escape, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see what happens when you drop into a 12th-century Chinese AirBnB, and beat up your host's son. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!