

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 4.

Last time, we covered the unlikely and undeserved rise of Gao Qiu from riffraff to the future emperor's pet to high official. He was appointed a marshal and placed in command of the imperial guards. He wasted no time abusing his newfound power to settle old scores against a drill instructor in the imperial guards named Wang Jin. That prompted Wang Jin and his mother to sneak out of the capital and flee toward the distant borderland prefecture of Yan'an (2,1), where they hoped to make a fresh start.

But to make his getaway, Wang Jin first had to give the slip to the two orderlies that had been assigned to him as his attendants. To do that, he told them both that he was going to offer incense at a temple in the city first thing the next day and that they were to go prepare the sacrificial meats and wait for him at the temple. So the next day, the two orderlies waited and waited and waited. But as noon approached, there was still no sign of Wang Jin. One of the orderlies, Corporal Li (3), decided to go to Wang Jin's home to check on him. But there, he found the doors locked. He asked all around, but no one had seen Wang Jin or his mother that day.

By now, dusk was approaching, and the other orderly, Corporal Zhang, had also come back from the temple, and the two of them now searched all evening. Then they waited at the house all night and still did not see Wang Jin or his mother. So the next morning, they went and checked with some of his relatives, but none of them had seen him either.

By now, the two corporals were getting a bad feeling about this, and they figured they had better report this to their boss. So they went to see Gao Qiu and told him, "Instructor Wang has abandoned his home and fled; no one knows where he and his mother have gone."

"So, that crook is trying to escape!" Gao Qiu said furiously. "Well, let's see him try!"

Gao Qiu immediately dispatched messages to various prefectures, ordering them to apprehend Wang Jin for desertion. As for the two corporals, since they had reported the matter on their own, they managed to escape punishment.

Let's leave Gao Qiu stewing in his anger and go catch up with Wang Jin and his mother. In the blink of an eye, they had already been on the road for more than a month. One day, as dusk approached, Wang Jin was carrying their luggage and following behind his mother on the horse.

"Thanks to Heaven's pity, we have escaped from danger," Wang Jin said. "Yan'an Prefecture is not far from here. Even if Marshal Gao sent men to catch me, they will not be able to do so."

With that happy thought on their minds, the two of them pressed on. But in their eagerness to get to their destination a little faster, they passed an inn without noticing, and soon, darkness was descending and they found themselves in the middle of nowhere, needing a place to spend the night.

Then, they noticed a glimmer of light in a grove of trees in the distance.

"That's it," Wang Jin said. "We can go there, apologize for our intrusion and ask for lodging for the night. We can resume our journey in the morning."

So they headed into the grove, and there, they saw a large manor, surrounded by an earthen wall. Outside the wall stood two or three hundred large willow trees. Wang Jin went to the front door and knocked, and knocked, and knocked. After much knocking, a workhand finally came out. Wang Jin set down his luggage and greeted him.

"What do you want?" the workhand asked.

"My mother and I were trying to cover too much ground. We missed an inn and found ourselves in the middle of nowhere. We hope you can put us up for the night, and we'll leave tomorrow morning. We will pay whatever is customary for lodging. I hope you will help us out."

“In that case, wait here while I go ask my master,” the workhand said. “If he’s ok with it, then it’s no problem for you to rest here.”

So the workhand disappeared back inside the manor. A good while later, he came back out.

“My master the squire has invited you two inside,” he said.

So Wang Jin helped his mother dismount. He then carried the luggage and grabbed hold of the horse’s reins and followed the workhand inside to a courtyard for threshing wheat. There he put down his luggage and tied the horse to a willow tree. They then went to a thatched hall to meet the squire.

The squire looked to be over 60. His hair and beard had all turned white. He wore a hood and a straight-cut, loose-fitting gown, tied at the waist with a black silk sash. On his feet, he donned a pair of tanned leather boots.

Wang Jin bowed, but the squire quickly stopped him.

“Sir, there’s no need to bow. Please get up. You’re travelers and must have endured hardships. Please have a seat.”

Once his guests were seated, the squire asked, “Where are you coming from? What brings you here?”

“My last name is Zhang,” Wang Jin answered, keeping his real identity a secret. “We used to live in the capital, but after losing all our money, we could not continue our business, so we are going to stay with relatives in Yan’an Prefecture. We tried to cover too much ground today and missed an inn, so we hope we can stay here for the night. We’ll leave in the morning and will be sure to pay for the lodging.”

“No problem at all,” the squire said. “Who among us travels with a house in tow? I don’t suppose you and your mother have eaten yet.”

So the squire now ordered his men to prepare a meal. Soon, a table was set up in the hall, and a workhand came in with a tray that held four vegetable dishes and a plate of beef. He set them down on the table and poured some wine.

“We have little to offer except crude country fare; I hope you don’t mind,” the squire said.

“We are putting you through too much trouble,” Wang Jin said as he stood up to offer his thanks.

“We have no way to repay your immense kindness.”

“Please, say no such thing,” the squire insisted. “Let’s drink.”

After a few cups of wine, the food was served and eaten. After the dishes had been cleared away, the squire showed them to their guest room.

“May I trouble you to stable and feed the horse that my mother rode?” Wang Jin asked. “We will pay for the feed, of course.”

“No problem at all,” the squire said. “We also have horses and mules. I’ll have my men lead your horse to our stable and feed it along with our own animals. Don’t worry about the feed.”

Wang Jin thanked the squire and carried his luggage into the guest room. A workhand lit a lamp and brought hot water for the guests to wash their feet. The squire then went back to his own quarters.

Wang Jin and his mother thanked the workhand, shut their doors, and went to sleep.

The next morning, it was past dawn, but Wang Jin and his mother had not yet emerged from their room. As the squire passed by, he could hear someone groaning inside.

“Sir, you have slept past dawn. It’s time to get up,” the squire said from outside.

Wang Jin stepped out from the room, greeted the squire, and said, “Actually I’ve been up for a while. My apologies for the many inconveniences we caused last night.”

“Who’s groaning?” the squire asked.

“To tell you the truth, my mother was exhausted from riding and started having chest pains last night.”

“In that case, do not worry yourself,” the squire told him. “Stay here for a few more days. I have a prescription for chest pains. I’ll have a workman go to the county to get the medicine for your mother. Tell her to not worry and just rest.”

So Wang Jin and his mother stayed at the squire’s manor. After five or six days, his mother had recovered, so Wang Jin was getting ready to hit the road again. As he walked to the stable to check on their horse, he noticed a young man hanging out in a clearing. He was stripped to the waist, revealing blue dragon tattoos all over his body. His face was as round as a silver platter. He looked to be about 18 or 19, and he was practicing with a staff.

Wang Jin, being a drill instructor, couldn’t help but stop and watch. After observing for a while, he said to himself, “The style is not bad, but it has weaknesses. It won’t beat anyone who has real skills.”

The young man heard that and became enraged.

“Who the hell are you?! How dare you mock my skills?!” he shouted angrily. “I have had seven or eight well-known teachers, and you think I can’t beat you? Do you dare to have a go with me?”

Before the youth had finished speaking, the old squire arrived and scolded him, “Don’t be rude!”

“But this bastard is mocking my skills with the staff!”

The squire now asked Wang Jin, “Sir, do you know how to handle weapons?”

“A little bit,” Wang Jin said. “May I ask how this young man is related to you?”

“He is my son.”

“In that case, if he’s eager to learn, then how about I give him a few pointers?”

“That would be great!” the squire said as he told the young man to come pay his respects to his new teacher.

But yeah, the young man wasn't having any of that. "Pa, don't listen to this rogue's nonsense! If he can beat my staff, THEN I'll have him as my teacher."

"If the young master won't take it too seriously, then we can have a go, just for fun," Wang Jin offered.

Well, the young man was definitely taking it too seriously. He was all amped up and ready to rumble. He whirled his staff over his head like a windmill and said, "C'mon, c'mon! Come at me, if you have the nerve!"

But Wang Jin just smiled and did not make a move. The squire said, "Sir, if you are willing to teach my son, then why not have a go?"

"I'm afraid that I might hurt him, and that won't look good," Wang Jin explained.

"No problem," the squire reassured him. "Even if you break his hand or leg, he would have brought it upon himself."

"Then forgive me," Wang Jin said as he walked over to the weapons rack and picked out a staff. He stepped into the clearing and assumed a stance.

The young man sized him up quickly and charged with staff in hand. Wang Jin turned and retreated, with his staff trailing behind. The young man kept charging. Suddenly, Wang Jin stopped, turned, and brought his staff down through the air. The young man saw it coming and lifted his staff to parry the blow. Except, there was no blow coming down through the air. Wang Jin's move was a bluff. He now swiftly pulled his staff back and thrust it against the young man's chest. With just one poke, the young man's staff went flying, and he fell flat on his back.

Wang Jin quickly tossed his own staff aside and helped the young man up while apologizing. The young man scrambled to his feet, pulled over a stool, asked Wang Jin to sit down, and then kowtowed to him.

“I have studied with many teachers, and yet it was all worthless,” he said. “Master, I have no choice but to ask for your instruction.”

Wang Jin replied, “My mother and I have imposed on you for days. We have no way to repay your kindness, so it’s only right that I shall do my best.”

The squire was delighted and told his son to get dressed, and then they all sat down in the rear hall. The squire ordered his workmen to slaughter a sheep and prepare wine, food, and fruits. He also invited Wang Jin’s mother to join them. After all four of them sat down, the squire stood up and offered a toast.

“Master,” he said to Wang Jin, “Your skills are so impressive; you must be a drill instructor. My son was blind to not recognize your abilities.”

“One does not lie to an honest man,” Wang Jin said with a smile. “My last name is actually not Zhang. I am Wang Jin, a drill instructor for the imperial guards in the capital. I play with weapons all day long. But we recently got a new Marshal Gao. He took a beating from my father once, and now he is commanding the imperial guards. He held an old grudge against me. I was under his command, so I couldn’t stand up to him. So my mother and I were fleeing to Yan’an Prefecture to find a living with Old General Zhong (1). We did not expect to end up here and run into you and your son and to receive such hospitality, not to mention treatment for my mother’s ailment. We have really imposed on you too much. Since your son is willing to learn, I will do my best to teach him. What he has learned in the past is just flash. The moves look good, but are useless in a real fight. I will teach him from scratch.”

Hearing this, the squire told his son to bow again to his new teacher, which the young man promptly did. The squire then told Wang Jin, “Our clan has always resided here on the border of Huayin (2,1) County. In front of us lies Huayin (2,1) Mountain. This village is called the Shi (3) Family Village, and it has about three to four hundred households, and all of them belong to the Shi clan. My son, Shi (3) Jin (4), has never taken to farming and only likes to play with weapons. His mother lectured him time and again,

but to no avail, and she got so upset that she died. So I can only let him do whatever he wants and have spent a lot of money on teachers for him. I also hired a skilled tattoo artist to decorate his arms and chest with nine dragons. Because of that, he's known throughout the county as Nine Dragons Shi (3) Jin (4). It's great to have you here. Now you can complete his training. I will of course reward you handsomely."

"Sir, don't worry," Wang Jin said. "If that is your wish, then your servant will teach him well."

So from that day forth, Wang Jin and his mother stayed at the manor. Each day, Shi Jin would ask Wang Jin to teach him how to use the 18 weapons. Now, these 18 weapons are considered the standard repertoire of Chinese martial arts. They were: lance, mallet, long bow, crossbow, jingal, jointed bludgeon, truncheon, sword, chain, hooks, hatchet, axe, trident, halberd, shield, staff, spear, and rake. And while they were busy doing that, old squire Shi went to the county seat to tend to his duties as a ward chief.

The days flew by, and soon half a year had passed. Shi Jin had re-learned the 18 weapons properly from the ground up and had become quite skilled in all of them, thanks to Wang Jin's instruction. Seeing this, Wang Jin began thinking to himself, "This place is nice, but it's not getting me anywhere." So one day, he told Shi Jin that he was taking his leave and resuming the stalled journey to Yan'an Prefecture. Shi Jin, of course, would not hear of it.

"Master, just stay here," he told Wang Jin. "I will take care of you and your mother for the rest of your lives. Won't that be great?"

"Brother," Wang Jin said, "thank you for your kindness. This is a very nice place, but I'm afraid that if Marshal Gao's men come looking for me here, you will get pulled in as well, and then we would both be in trouble. I am determined to go to Yan'an Prefecture and serve in the garrison under Old General Zhong (1). It's a post on the border and they need men. I can make a fresh start there."



Despite much pleading from Shi Jin and the old squire, Wang Jin's mind was made up. So they resigned themselves to preparing a feast for him and his mother. They also presented him with a platter with two bolts of satin and 100 taels of silver. Just for your reference, 1 tael in the Song Dynasty was the rough equivalent of about 1.3 ounces, so 100 taels of silver was more than 8 pounds. That was literally a nice chunk of change.

The next day, Wang Jin packed his bags, prepped his horse, and he and his mother bid goodbye to their hosts and set off toward Yan'an. Shi Jin had a workman carry his master's luggage while he personally escorted Wang Jin for about 3 miles, unable to let his teacher go. When it finally came time to part ways, Shi Jin did so with tears in his eyes. Nonetheless, they said goodbye to each other, and Wang Jin and his mother headed toward Yan'an, and out of our narrative. Yeah, we're never going to hear from him again.

So instead of following Wang Jin on his journey, we are now going to follow Shi Jin. After bidding goodbye to his teacher, he returned to the manor and resumed working out every day. He was in the prime of his youth, and he had no wife, so he would get up in the middle of the night and work on his fighting skills. During the day, all he did was practice riding and archery behind the house.

Within less than a half a year, though, Shi Jin's father fell ill and became bedridden. Doctors from near and far were summoned, but no one could do anything for the old squire, and soon, he was dead. Shi Jin set about preparing a coffin and hiring Buddhist monks to hold seven services, one every seven days. He also hired some Daoist priests to chant prayers to ensure his father's soul went straight to heaven, and they conducted more than 10 such services. Finally, he picked an auspicious day on which to bury his father. All 300-some households from the village came out to mourn the old squire, who was buried in the ancestral cemetery on a hillside west of the village.

Now that his father was gone, the affairs of the manor fell to Shi Jin. Except, remember that he had no interest in farming, and that did not change with his father's passing. From that point on, there was no one to look after the household affairs or the land. Shi Jin just spent his days looking for sparring partners.

In this way, three or four months soon passed and it was now the middle of June, and the heat was unbearable. One day, Shi Jin was bored with nothing to do, so he sat on a folding chair under a willow tree by the threshing ground in his manor, seeking relief from the heat. From across the way, a breeze blew through the pine trees, prompting him to cry out, "Nice breeze!"

Just then, he spotted someone peeking around.

"What's this?! Who is that looking around my house?!" Shi Jin shouted as he jumped up and followed the man behind a tree. It turned out to be someone he knew, a rabbit hunter named Li Ji (1).

"Why are you sneaking around my manor?" Shi Jin demanded. "Are you spying on me?"

Li Ji (1) came forward and greeted Shi Jin respectfully and said, "Sir, I was just looking for your servant, Shorty Qiu (1), to go have a bowl of wine. I saw you sitting here, so I dared not intrude."

Shi Jin now asked, "I do have a question for you: You used to sell us game quite often, and I have never underpaid you. So why have you stopped? Do you think I have no money?"

"I would never dare," Li Ji said. "It's just that I haven't caught any game, so I haven't come."

"Nonsense! Huayin (2,1) Mountain is huge; how can there not be any deer or rabbits to hunt?"

"Sir, you don't understand," Li Ji explained. "Recently a group of bandits have occupied the mountain and set up a fort there. They have assembled some 700 men and more than 100 good horses. Their leader is called Zhu (1) Wu (3), the Resourceful Strategist. The second in command is called Chen (2) Da (2), the Stream-Leaping Tiger. The third chieftain is named Yang (2) Chun (1), the White Flower Serpent. They have been robbing and pillaging, and the authorities in Huayin (2,1) County can do

nothing to stop them except put out a bounty of 3,000 strings of coins. But who would dare to go after them? That's why I haven't dared to go to the mountain to hunt, so where would I find game to sell?"

Hearing this, Shi Jin replied, "I HAVE heard that there were bandits, but I didn't know they have become such a big deal. They will no doubt make trouble for me. Ok. If you do find game, bring some to me."

After Li Ji (1) took his leave, Shi Jin returned to the manor and thought to himself, "Those bandits have gotten so bold. They will likely attack our village."

So he ordered his men to slaughter and cook two water buffaloes and bring out some good homemade wine. He then burned paper replicas of gold and silver ingots as an offering to heaven and prayed for good luck. Next, he sent his workmen to go invite all the households in the village to his manor. They assembled in his thatch-covered hall and sat down according to age.

As the workmen served everyone wine, Shi Jin said, "I have heard that there are three bandit chiefs on Huayin Mountain. They have assembled some 700 men and are robbing and pillaging. Since they are getting big, they will bring trouble to our village sooner or later. So I have invited you all here to discuss it. When those bandits come here, you all get ready. My manor will sound the alarm, and you all grab weapons and come help us. And if any of you have trouble, we will do the same for you and help each other defend the village. If the bandits come, I will take care of it."

To this everyone said, "We're just farmers. Young master, you make the decisions. When you sound the alarm, who would dare not answer?"

They then proceeded to feast on buffalo burgers and Shi family micro-brews before dispersing back to their homes to prepare weapons and such. From that day forth, Shi Jin reinforced the gates and walls of his manor and put everything in order. He issued suits of armor and had the weapons and horses all prepped to deal with a bandit raid.

So now, let's skip on over to Huayin Mountain, where we find the three aforementioned bandit chiefs sitting in their fort, talking about stuff. Their leader, Zhu Wu (3), the Resourceful Strategist, was no fighter, but what he lacked in brawn, he made up for with brain. One day, he said to the other two chieftains, Chen Da (2) and Yang Chun (1): "I have heard that Huayin County is offering 3,000 strings of coins for our capture. I worry that when the authorities come and we must fight them, we would not have enough provisions. Why don't we go pillage some food and store it here at the fort so that we can hold out in case government troops come calling?"

"Quite right," said Chen Da, the Stream-Leaping Tiger. "Let's go demand grain from Huayin County and see what they'll do about it."

But Yang Chun, the White Flower Serpent, disagreed. "Let's not go to Huayin County. Let's go to Pucheng (2,2) County. That is a sure thing."

"But Pucheng (2,2) County has few people and even less money and grain," Chen Da said. "We should go raid Huayin County. The people there are prosperous and have lots of money and grain."

"Brother, you haven't heard," Yang Chun countered. "If we go to raid Huayin County, we would have to pass by Shi (3) Family Village. That Nine Dragons Shi Jin is dangerous and should be left alone. He would never let us pass."

But Chen Da scoffed. "Brother, you're so timid! If we can't even pass through a village, how can we resist government troops?"

"Brother, don't underestimate him," Yang Chun cautioned. "He is very skilled."

Zhu Wu now chimed in and said, "I, too, have heard that he is a real hero and has real skills. Brother, don't go."

But all this talk just riled up Chen Da even more. “Shut your damn mouths!” he cried. “Stop talking up others and putting ourselves down. He’s just a man, too. Does he have 3 heads and 6 arms? I don’t believe you!”

Chen Da then shouted to his men, “Prepare my horse. We will go attack Shi Family Village first, and then take Huayin County.”

Zhu Wu and Yang Chun tried time and again to talk their comrade out of his hot-headed plan, but Chen Da refused to listen. He donned his armor and mounted his horse. Then he called up about 150 men, and they beat their gongs and drums as they set off for Shi Family Village.

To see how these bandits will fare against Shi Jin, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we’ll witness the fallout of the ancient Chinese equivalent of an email hack and appreciate the importance of good information security. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!