

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 14.

Last time, Lin Chong had been framed by Marshal Gao Qiu for trespassing with intent to assassinate and ended up being exiled to a penal colony in the distant prefecture of Cangzhou (1,1). Two guards had been assigned to take him there. Before they left the capital, the two escorts -- Dong (3) Chao (1) and Xue (1) Ba (4) -- went home to pack their things. That's when Dong Chao received an invitation from an unknown visitor asking him to meet in a nearby tavern.

Dong Chao went to the tavern and followed the waiter to a secluded room, where a man was seated. This guy wore a hat that was round at the bottom with a steeple at the top, kind of like a little turret with a roof. He was dressed in a black silk tunic, black boots, and plain stockings. When he saw Dong Chao come in, this man quickly rose to greet him and invited him to sit.

"We have never met, sir," Dong Chao said. "For what purpose have you summoned me?"

"Please sit," the stranger replied. "All will be revealed soon."

Dong Chao sat down across from the man, and the waiter laid out wine and food.

"Where does Mr. Xue (1) Ba (4) live?" the man asked, inquiring about Dong Chao's partner.

"Just one street over," Dong Chao said.

The stranger summoned the waiter and told him to go invite Xue Ba as well. After a while, the waiter returned with Xue Ba, and Dong Chao told him, "This gentleman wants to talk to us."

"What is your name, sir?" Xue Ba asked.

"You will find out soon; have some wine first," the stranger replied.

So the three men sat down and drank a few cups. Then, the stranger reached into his sleeve and pulled out 10 taels of gold. Not silver, but gold. He put the gold on the table and told his two guests, "Sirs, you may each take five taels. I just have a small favor to ask."

"We have never met before; why are you giving us gold?" the two guards asked.

"Are you going to Cangzhou?" the man said.

“We have been ordered by the prefect to escort the prisoner Lin Chong there,” Dong Chao told him.

“In that case, I have a request. I am Captain Lu Qian (1), one of Marshal Gao’s confidants.”

The two guards immediately greeted him with great deference, saying, “Who are we to have the audacity to sit across from you?”

Lu Qian now continued. “You know that Lin Chong is the marshal’s nemesis. The marshal has ordered me to give you 10 taels of gold as a gift. I hope you will accept it. There is no need for you to go far on your journey. Just find some quiet spot along the way and finish off Lin Chong. And bring back a certification of his death from the local authorities. If the Kaifeng Prefecture gives you any trouble, Marshal Gao will take care of it. It won’t be an issue.”

But Dong Chao said, “I fear it would be impossible. The prefect’s order was to take him to Cangzhou alive, not to execute him. Besides, Lin Chong is not that old. How would we explain his death? It could cause trouble.”

But Xue Ba begged to differ. “Dong Chao, listen to me,” he said. “Even if Marshal Gao ordered us to kill ourselves, we would have to obey. Besides, this gentleman has given us gold. Don’t overthink it. Let’s split the money and do them a favor, and they’ll take care of us in the future. There is a large, treacherous forest on the way. It won’t take much to kill Lin Chong there.”

So Xue Ba accepted the gold and told Lu Qian, “Sir, rest easy. You will hear news before too long.”

Lu Qian was delighted and said, “Mr. Xue, you really don’t beat around the bush. When the deed is done, you must bring back the golden print on Lin Chong’s face as proof. I will have 20 ounces of gold waiting for you as payment. I await your good news. Don’t delay.”

Oh, and by the way, when Lu Qian said to bring back the golden print on Lin Chong’s face, he was referring to the tattoo that Lin Chong received, which stated his punishment and branded him as a criminal. So this guy, who was supposedly Lin Chong’s best friend, was now bribing men to kill his friend and cut off a piece of his skin as proof. That’s some very fine people there.

After a few more cups of wine, the three men paid their bill and parted ways. Dong Chao and Xue Ba fetched their bundles from home, each grabbed a wooden staff, and went to collect Lin Chong and set out on their journey. They walked for about 10 miles before stopping for the day. Now, during the Song dynasty, when guards were escorting prisoners on a trip, they got to stay for free at whatever inn they came across. So the three of them turned in for the night at an inn along the way. The next morning, they made breakfast and set out again.

It was the sixth month of the year, the height of summer, and it was scorching hot. And Lin Chong was starting to feel the effects of the 20 strokes he took on his back a couple days earlier. The wounds didn't hurt that much when they were fresh, but now, they were starting to get irritated. Between the wounds, the heat, and that 10-pound cangue he was carrying around his neck, Lin Chong was soon dragging his steps.

And to top it all off, he was catching crap from one of the guards. Dong Chao saw him stumbling along and started complaining, "Damn idiot! It's a good 700 miles to Cangzhou. When the hell are we going to get there if you keep walking like this?!"

"Sir," Lin Chong said respectfully, "I received a few strokes a couple days ago and the wounds are hurting. And with this scorching heat, I hope you can be a little patient with me."

The other guard, Xue Ba, now tried to play good cop and told Lin Chong, "Just go at your own pace; don't listen to his grumbling."

But Dong Chao made sure there was plenty of grumbling to listen to, as he complained and fussed nonstop along the way, saying stuff like, "What rotten luck that we ended up with a wretched demon like you."

At long last, the day was getting short and the sun was starting to set. They stopped at a village inn. Once they got to their room, while the two guards were putting away their stuff, Lin Chong opened his

own bundle. Before the guards said anything, he took out a few loose pieces of silver and asked the clerk at the inn to bring some food and wine, as well as some rice, all on his tab.

So the two guards ate and drank, and then they added more wine for Lin Chong, until he passed out from alcohol and exhaustion and slumped over, nevermind the uncomfortable cangue around his neck.

While he was passed out, Xue Ba brought in a wash basin filled with hot water and said, "Instructor Lin, here, wash your feet so you can have a good night's rest."

Lin Chong struggled to get up, but the cangue was making it hard. Xue Ba now said, "Here, let me wash your feet for you."

"Oh no, that won't do," Lin Chong said.

"We're travelers; no need to stand on ceremony," Xue Ba insisted.

Well, that's awfully nice of him. So Lin Chong put his feet out. Xue Ba grabbed them by the ankles and dunked them into the water. And immediately, Lin Chong could feel the skin on his feet burning.

See, Xue Ba didn't just fill the basin with hot water; he filled it with boiling water, on purpose. Lin Chong screamed and jerked his feet back up, but by now they were red and blistered.

"I can't take it!" Lin Chong cried.

And that invited more verbal abuse. Xue Ba cursed him and said, "It's always the criminal's job to serve the guards, not the other way around. I was being nice and helping him wash his feet, and yet he's complaining about the temperature of the water! No good deed goes unpunished!"

And Xue Ba went on like that for half the night, and Lin Chong dared not say anything and just laid down in a corner. The two guards now got themselves some warm water, washed their own feet, and went to bed.

But if Lin Chong thought he could at least get a decent night's rest, he was in for something else. Around 3 a.m., before the staff at the inn were even awake, the two guards got up and started making breakfast. Lin Chong woke up groggy, had no appetite after the ordeal from the previous day, and could

barely walk, thanks to that foot wash last night. But the guards weren't waiting around. Xue Ba brandished his staff and told Lin Chong to hurry up and get moving.

Lin Chong looked for his shoes, but they were nowhere to be found. Hmm, what could've happened to them, I wonder. Dong Chao now took out a pair of brand new straw sandals with loops and ties made of woven hemp and told Lin Chong to put them on. Hmm ... that's ... nice of him. What's the catch?

Well, the catch is that new straw sandals can be rather prickly and rough, and it just so happens that Lin Chong's feet were full of fresh blisters after getting scorched the night before. But since his old shoes had mysteriously vanished, Lin Chong had no choice but to strap on the new sandals. After they settled their bill with the clerk, the guards led Lin Chong out of the inn, and it was only about 5 a.m.

Within a mile, Lin Chong was struggling. The blisters on his feet had been rubbed raw by the new sandals and were bleeding. He could barely walk, and was groaning with every step.

"Hurry up!" Xue Ba cursed. "Or you'll get a taste of my staff."

"Sirs, please take it easy. I would never dare to stall. My feet really are hurting and I can't move."

Now it was Dong Chao's turn to play good cop. "Here, you can lean on me," he said. So Lin Chong leaned on Dong Chao and struggled forward for another mile or so. In front of them, an ominous forest came into view, shrouded in mist. These woods were known as the Wild Boar Forest. This forest was the most dangerous location on the road from the capital to Cangzhou. During the Song Dynasty, if you had a score to settle with someone who was being exiled to Cangzhou, you could easily slip the escorts a few pieces of silver and have them finish off your enemy in these woods. It was, in fact, quite a common occurrence, and countless people had lost their lives here. So yeah, guess what's about to go down.

"We've been going for three hours and have not even covered three miles," Dong Chao said as they walked toward the woods. "When are we going to reach Cangzhou like this?"

"I'm getting tired, too," Xue Ba replied. "Let's go rest in the woods for a bit."

So they turned into the forest, put down their stuff and sat down against some trees. With a grunt, an exhausted Lin Chong also collapsed against a large tree.

Dong Chao now said, "We have to wait for this guy every step of the way. Even I am getting tired. Let me take a quick nap."

So he put down his staff and leaned up against a tree. But as soon as he shut his eyes, he jumped to his feet again, going, "No no no no."

"What's wrong?" Lin Chong asked.

Dong Chao and Xue Ba said to him, "The two of us want to take a nap, but there are no restraints here. What if you escaped? We can't sleep soundly with that on our minds."

"Sirs, I am a real man," Lin Chong assured them. "Since I have been convicted, I will never flee."

"Yeah, who the hell is going to take your word for it?" Dong Chao scoffed. "If you want to reassure us, then we'll have to tie you up."

"If you want to, go ahead. I would not dare to resist."

So Dong Chao took off the rope hanging from his waist and strapped Lin Chong to a tree trunk, tying down his hands and feet in the process.

This done, the two guards took a step back, picked up their staffs, looked at Lin Chong and said, "We didn't want to kill you, but the day before last, that Lu Qian brought an order from Marshal Gao, instructing us to finish you here and bring back the tattoo on your face. Even if we waited a few more days, you would end up dead anyway, so let's just finish this off here today, so that we can go home earlier. Don't hold a grudge against us. This is an order from above and not up to us. Just remember that a year from today will be the first anniversary of your death. We have a deadline to meet."

When he heard this, Lin Chong teared up and pleaded, "Good sirs, there is no bad blood between us. If you can somehow spare me, I will never forget it."

“Bullcrap!” Dong Chao scoffed. “We can’t spare you!”

And with that, Xue Ba raised his staff and brought it down toward Lin Chong’s head with all his might. Lin Chong could do nothing but shut his eyes and wait for the killing blow. But before you could blink, a thunderous roar rang out from behind a pine tree, and a steel Buddhist staff flew through air and deflected Xue Ba’s staff, knocking it out of his hands and off to god knows where.

In the next instant, a fat monk leaped out and roared, “I have been waiting for you!”

Guess who.

The monk was dressed in a black cassock, wore a knife around his waist, and brandished a Buddhist staff, which he now raised to strike the two dumbfounded guards. In that moment, though, Lin Chong had opened his eyes and recognized his sworn brother Lu Zhishen, and he shouted, “Brother, stop! Listen to me!”

Hearing this, Lu Zhishen pulled back his staff, but the two guards were so stunned that they just remained frozen in place.

“It has nothing to do with them,” Lin Chong said. “Marshal Gao sent Lu Qian to order them to kill me. How can they say no? If you kill these two, you would be killing innocents.”

[Sigh] Oh good ol’ Lin Chong. Such a softie. Most other men, after what he had to endure from those guards the last couple days, probably would’ve personally ripped out their hearts. But here was Lin Chong, pleading for their lives not even a minute after they had tried to kill him. Lu Zhishen now pulled out his knife, cut off the rope, and helped Lin Chong to his feet.

“Brother,” Lu Zhishen said, “ever since we parted on the day you bought the sword, I have been worried sick about you. After you were convicted, I had no way to rescue you. Then I heard that you had been sentenced to exile to Cangzhou, but I didn’t see you in front of the prefecture. Then I heard someone say that you were locked up in a guard house. Then, I saw the waiter go tell these two guards

that someone was waiting to talk to them in a tavern. That made me suspicious and I couldn't just let you go. When you stayed at that inn last night, I was there, too. When I overheard how they were tormenting you and scalding your feet, I wanted to kill these bastards right then and there. But there were too many people at the inn who might intercede. Seeing that they were up to no good made me even more worried. When you set out this morning, I rushed on ahead to this forest to wait for my chance to kill these bastards. They tried to kill you, so I'm going to kill them!"

But Lin Chong again held him back. "Brother, you have already saved me, so no need to kill them."

Well, Lu Zhishen would beg to differ, but he acquiesced to his brother's wishes on this occasion.

"Listen up, you bastards!" he barked to the two guards. "If not for my brother, I would have beaten you into meat paste! But on account of him, I will spare your lives."

Then, putting his knife back in its sheath, he shouted again, "Help my brother up and follow me, now!"

Lu Zhishen then started stomping off with his staff in hand. The two guards did not dare to say a word to him. They just pleaded with Lin Chong, saying, "Instructor Lin, please save us!" They then grabbed their stuff, helped Lin Chong along, and carried his bundle for him.

The group exited the forest and walked for about a mile before coming across a small tavern at the entrance to a village. The four men sat down inside the tavern and asked the waiter to bring out 8 or 9 pounds of meat and a couple horns of wine, as well as some griddle cakes.

While the waiter was busy laying out the spread, the two guards asked Lu Zhishen, "Master, which monastery do you preside over?"

Lu Zhishen chuckled and said, "Why do you bastards ask? Are you going to get Gao Qiu to fix me good? Others may be afraid of him, but I'm not. If I run into him, I'll give him 300 whacks with my staff."

Well, that shut the two guards up. After the meal, they tidied up their bundles, paid the tab, and left the tavern.



“Brother, where will you go now?” Lin Chong asked Lu Zhishen.

“To kill a man you must draw blood; to save a man you must see him to safety. I can’t leave you. I’ll take you all the way to Cangzhou.”

When the two guards heard that, they silently went ah crap, there goes our plan. What are we going to tell Marshal Gao now? But it’s not like they had a say in the matter, so they had no choice but to tag along. Of course, the rest of the journey was quite different from the first leg. Lu Zhishen decided when to travel and when to stop, and the guards did not dare to object. If they did what he asked, he would satisfy himself with a barrage of verbal abuse. If they screwed up in the slightest, he would beat them, and they dared not talk back.

After a couple days’ travel, Lu Zhishen found a cart and had Lin Chong sit on it while he and the guards accompanied the cart on foot. The guards, of course, followed obediently, lest they get a taste of the business end of Lu Zhishen’s staff. All along the way, Lu Zhishen bought plenty of wine and meat for Lin Chong, and the two guards got to taste a little bit as well. Whenever they came across an inn, they would stop early and set out late, and it was the guards’ job to cook.

One night, Dong Chao whispered to Xue Ba, “That monk has us under his thumb. When we get back, Marshal Gao will punish us for sure.”

Xue Ba said, “I heard that the Great Xiangguo (4,2) Monastery’s vegetable garden recently added a new monk named Lu Zhishen. I think that must be him. When we get back, let’s tell the truth -- that we tried to kill Lin Chong in the Wild Boar Forest but that monk saved him and escorted him all the way to Cangzhou, so we had no opportunity. We’ll return the 10 taels of gold and let that Lu Qian go sort it out with the monk, while you and I stay far away.”

“Quite right,” Dong Chao said, and so it was settled.

Anyway, they traveled in this manner for another 18 days or so, and they were now just 20-some miles away from Cangzhou, and the rest of the journey was through densely populated areas with no

deserted places where the guards could try anything. After ascertaining this, Lu Zhishen told the group to stop and rest in a pine forest. There, he told Lin Chong, "Brother, Cangzhou is not far from here, and the rest of the trip is through populated areas and doesn't have any deserted places. This I have verified. So I will take my leave of you now. We will meet again another day."

Lin Chong replied, "Brother, when you get back, please bring word to my father-in-law. If I survive, I will repay you for your rescue and protection."

Lu Zhishen then gave Lin Chong about 20 taels of silver, and he also slipped a few taels to the two guards. But that was accompanied by a stern warning.

"I should have cut off your damn heads, but I spared your lives on my brother's account. The journey is almost over, so don't get any ideas."

"We would never! It was all the marshal's orders," the two quickly replied.

After handing them the silver, Lu Zhishen stared at them and asked, "Are your heads harder than that pine tree?"

"Our heads are just normal flesh and skin wrapped around some bone."

Lu Zhishen now raised his staff and swung it into the pine tree, leaving a two-inch-deep gash and sending the tree toppling over.

"If you two bastards get any ideas, your heads will end up like this," he shouted before giving a wave of his hand, saying to Lin Chong, "Brother, take care." And then, he disappeared in the other direction.

The two guards were so stunned that their mouths hung agape for a good long while, until Lin Chong reminded them that it was time to get back on the road.

"What a brute monk," the two guards said in astonishment. "He cut down a pine tree with one blow."

“That’s nothing,” Lin Chong said. “He pulled up a willow tree roots and all at the Xiangguo Monastery.”

The two guards could only shake their heads when they heard this, but Lin Chong had also just inadvertently confirmed their suspicions about Lu Zhishen’s identity. That’ll have some consequences down the road, but for now, the three men left the forest and continued until noon. Down the highway, they spotted a tavern in the distance, so they headed there and sat down. Lin Chong asked the two guards to sit at the head of the table, but it took quite a while before the two could sit easy for the first time in a long time.

This tavern had a kitchen table covered with wine and food, and several waiters rushed to and fro, moving things to this and that table, but no one paid any attention to Lin Chong’s table. After about an hour of neglect, Lin Chong finally got impatient. He pounded the table and said, “Hey, tavern keeper. How rude you are to a customer! You ignore me because I’m a prisoner. But it’s not like I want to eat for free. What’s the deal?”

The tavern keeper replied, “You don’t get it. I’m doing you a favor.”

“How is it a favor to not sell me wine and food?”

“You don’t understand. In this village, there is a wealthy man named Chai (2) Jin (4). Everyone here calls him Lord Chai (2), and on the Jianghu (1,2) scene, people call him Little Whirlwind.”

Ok, so I need to pause here to explain a word that I just threw at you: Jianghu (1,2). In Chinese, the character Jiang (1) means river, and the character Hu (2) means lakes. So together, they literally mean the rivers and the lakes. Of course, that’s NOT what it actually means. The term Jianghu refers to the notion of a world and people residing on the fringe of what is considered proper or mainstream society. I’ve seen some sources translate this term as the “underworld”, as in the criminal world. But I don’t think that’s quite right. While there are certainly outlaws in the Jianghu sphere, there are also people

who do not take to banditry or other illegal activities as a day job. In fact, some people on the Jianghu scene are quite well off, like this Chai Jin that the tavern keeper is talking about, but they are also not averse to mingling with the less seemly elements as well. Many of these people residing in the Jianghu scene tend to drift from place to place, getting into one adventure after another as they intercede in what they perceive to be injustices. In fact, the expression “traveling the Jianghu” means to lead a transient existence.

To give you a better idea of the Jianghu scene, I’ll offer up this partial quote from my friend Kaiser Kuo, host of the Sinica Podcast. This comes from one of his posts to a question on Quora. In it, he describes Jianghu as:

“... a storied, semi-mythic realm of taverns and inns where our heroes drink and form fast bonds of friendship, temples where wise or wicked monks bestow scrolls of great wisdom or great evil, caverns where potent swords or talismans lie secreted across the centuries, mountain bandit lairs where the righteous gather to justly uphold honor against a corrupt dynasty, palaces where virtuous but ass-kicking maidens fan themselves coyly behind silk screens, and market squares where epic martial arts battles unfold.”

I’m going into some detail about this term because it’s a word that we will hear repeatedly as we go forward, as many of the characters we will encounter are players on the Jianghu scene. In fact, if you think about it, we’ve already met a few of them. Someone like Shi Jin, who started out a law-abiding farmer but then befriended some bandits and as a result, ended up on the wrong side of the law. Or Lu Zhishen, who befriended Shi Jin while the latter was on the run from the law, and then ended up being on the run from the law himself. And now, a different type of character on the Jianghu scene, Chai Jin, has been introduced.

To see what the big deal is with this Chai Jin, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see how money really does make the world go around, especially at penal colony. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!