

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 15.

Last time, Lin Chong's life was hanging by a thread as the two guards escorting him to the penal colony in Cangzhou tried to murder him on the way as instructed by Marshal Gao Qiu. But Lin Chong's dear friend and sworn brother Lu Zhishen saved the day and then escorted him until they had reached the safe final leg of the journey. From there, Lin Chong and his now thoroughly cowed guards proceeded without Lu Zhishen. When they stopped at a village tavern, they learned of a local rich man named Chai Jin, who had the nickname Little Whirlwind.

"He is a descendant of the former emperor of the Great Zhou Dynasty," the tavern keeper told Lin Chong.

So this Zhou Dynasty the tavern keeper mentioned was the Later Zhou, not to be confused with the other two Zhou Dynasties that came earlier in Chinese history. This Later Zhou existed from the year 951 to 960, and it was the immediate predecessor to the Song Dynasty. The founder of the Song was a senior general in the court of the Later Zhou, and he came to power in a coup that resulted in the last emperor of the Later Zhou abdicating his throne.

"Because of his ancestor's abdication," the tavern keeper continued, "the founding Song emperor awarded his family an imperial decree of immunity, so no one dares to give Chai Jin any trouble. He loves to take in men of valor who come through here, and has something like 50 of them living on his estate. He often tells us, 'If any exiled prisoners come through your tavern, send them to my estate, and I will give them money.' So if I sell you wine and food now and let you drink until your face turns red, then he's going to think you have money and won't help you. That's why I was doing you a favor in not serving you."

When Lin Chong heard this, he told his two guards, "When I was a drill instructor in the capital, I often heard the men in the army mention Lord Chai's name. Turns out he's here. Let's go see him."

The two guards figured they stood to lose nothing from this, so they agreed. As they packed up to leave, Lin Chong asked for directions, and the tavern keeper told him, "He lives up ahead, about a mile away. Turn at the big stone bridge, and the large estate is his."

After thanking the tavern keeper, Lin Chong and company headed that way, and sure enough, they saw a big stone bridge after about a mile. They crossed the bridge and saw a flat, wide road in front of them. Down the road, in the shade of green willow trees, they spotted a large manor house, surrounded on all sides by a wide moat. On both sides of the moat were large weeping willows, and under the willows stood a white outer wall.

After a few more turns, Lin Chong and company arrived at the estate. On a plank bridge sat four or five workhands, just shooting the breeze. The three travelers greeted them, and Lin Chong said, "Sirs, may I trouble you to let your master know that a prisoner exiled to Cangzhou's penal colony named Lin is here to pay his respects."

"Ah, not your lucky day," the workhands told him. "If our master were home, he would give you wine, food, and money. But he went out hunting early this morning."

"When will he be back?" Lin Chong inquired.

"Hard to say. He might have gone over to his east manor to rest, but maybe not. We don't know for sure."

Lin Chong sighed and said, "In that case, it's my misfortune to not be able to meet him. Well, we might as well go."

So they took their leave and resumed their journey, feeling quite gloomy. After less than half a mile, though, they spotted a group of riders approaching from deep in the distant woods. Every one of the riders looked as handsome as their horses were stout. They all carried bows and arrows and were accompanied by several hunting dogs. In their midst was a nobleman who rode a snow white horse with curly mane. This guy looked to be about 35. He had the eyebrows of a dragon and the eyes of a phoenix.

His teeth were gleaming white and his lips ruby red. His mouth was framed by a drooping mustache and a slim goatee. On his head sat a black flowered silk hat with curled-up corners. He donned a purple gown with designs embroidered on the chest. Around his waist was a smart-looking girdle inlaid with fine jade. His feet were shod in black boots with green stripes and gold-colored thread. He wore a bow across his shoulder and a quiver of arrows by his side.

As this nobleman led the group of riders toward the estate, Lin Chong couldn't help but wonder if this was Chai Jin. But he did not dare to ask. But then, the young nobleman rode toward the three travelers and asked, "Who is this gentleman wearing the cangue?"

Lin Chong quickly bowed and said, "My name is Lin Chong. I was a drill instructor for the imperial guards in the capital. But I ran afoul of Marshal Gao, so he found an excuse to frame me and had me exiled to the penal colony at Cangzhou. I heard at the tavern up the road that there is a Lord Chai in these parts whose doors are open to men of talent, so we came to pay our respects. But alas, we were unlucky and did not get to meet him."

The nobleman quickly hopped off his horse and rushed to Lin Chong, saying, "I am Chai Jin. Please forgive me for not being at home to welcome you!"

As he spoke, Chai Jin kneeled on the grass, prompting Lin Chong to hurriedly return the gesture. Chai Jin then took Lin Chong by the hand and they walked back to the estate together. When the workhands saw their master coming, they quickly opened the manor gates, and Chai Jin brought his guests to the parlor, where they exchanged formal greetings.

"I have long heard of your great name," Chai Jin said to Lin Chong. "I never expected that you would come visit my humble abode. My lifelong dream has been fulfilled!"

"I am a nobody," Lin Chong replied. "I have long heard of your lordship, as your name is revered everywhere. I never expected to be exiled and sent this way. It is my great fortune to be able to meet your acquaintance."

After much mutual modesty, Chai Jin convinced Lin Chong to take the seat of honor. The two escorts, Dong (3) Chao (1) and Xue (1) Ba (4), also sat down. Chai Jin now told his men to bring wine. A moment later, a few workhands came in with a platter of meat, a platter of griddle cakes, and a bottle of warmed wine. They also carried another platter, which held a heap of white, uncooked rice. And on top of the rice sat 10 strings of coins.

Now this was apparently the standard welcoming package that Chai Jin gave to any prisoner who came to his house, and honestly, that's pretty good. But Lin Chong was no ordinary prisoner. When Chai Jin saw what his men had brought out, he frowned and told them, "You country bumpkins don't know any better. How can we slight the drill instructor with this stuff? Go bring fine fruit and wine, and then slaughter and prepare a sheep. Make it quick!"

Lin Chong stood up and said, "My lord, no need for anything else. This is plenty."

"Say no such thing. It's a rare pleasure to have you here. How can we slight you?"

So the workhands did as the boss ordered and brought out the fruit and wine. And by the way, in this time period, apparently they ate fruit before the meal, as a sort of appetizer. I'm definitely going to do a supplemental episode about food in the Song Dynasty; it'll just probably be a ways down the road. So stay tuned for that.

Chai Jin now stood up and personally poured three cups of wine for his guests. Lin Chong thanked him and drank, and the two escorts followed suit. Only now did Chai Jin get around to taking off the bow and arrows he had been wearing, and then he sat down in the position of host around the banquet table. Lin Chong took the seat for the guest of honor, and the two escorts sat next to him. Chai Jin and Lin Chong started chatting about this and that and miscellaneous adventures and what's happening on the Jianghu (1,2) scene. Hey, there's that word again. If you need a refresher on its meaning, refer back to episode 14.

Before they knew it, the setting sun was hugging the horizon, and a feast of delicacies covered the table. Chai Jin again personally poured three rounds of wine for his guests and then told his men to bring out soup. They drank the soup, and chased it with another five or six cups of wine.

Just then, a workhand came in and said, "The teacher is here."

"Then invite him to come join us," Chai Jin said, telling his men to set up another table.

Lin Chong stood up and saw the teacher come in. This guy wore a crooked cap and swaggered in with his chest sticking out, looking quite full of himself.

"The workhand referred to him as 'teacher,' so he must be Lord Chai's arms instructor," Lin Chong thought to himself. So he bowed and offered his respect to this teacher, whose last name was Hong (2).

But his greetings were completely ignored and went unreturned, which left Lin Chong staring down, still stuck in his bow. Chai Jin pointed at Lin Chong and told Instructor Hong (2), "This is Lin Chong, the instructor in spears and staffs for the imperial guard in the capital. Here, you guys should get to know each other."

Lin Chong now kneeled and bowed again, to which Instructor Hong said, "No need. Get up," but he did not bow to return the greeting, which was quite rude and made Chai Jin very unhappy. Lin Chong, though, was trying to be the bigger man. He bowed twice and then stood up and offered Instructor Hong his own seat. Now, this being China, this gesture normally would have led to a round of, "Here, I insist you take the seat." followed by "No! No! You take it!" But Instructor Hong did no such thing. Instead, he just took the seat of the guest of honor without so much as a pause, and that made Chai Jin even more unhappy. So Lin Chong scooched down to the next seat with the two escorts.

"My lord, why are you pulling out all the stops for a convict today?" Instructor Hong asked, continuing his indelicate manners toward the guest of honor.

"This is no ordinary man," Chai Jin explained. "He's the instructor of the imperial guard. Teacher, why are you disrespecting him like this?"

“My lord, because you like playing with weapons, all the convicts who come through these parts flock here. And every one of them claims to be some sort of arms instructor, just to bum some wine, food, and money from you. Why do you take them seriously?”

So, this conversation was getting awfully awkward awfully fast. While Lin Chong remained silent, Chai Jin tried to defend him.

“It’s hard to judge someone based on appearance. Don’t underestimate him.”

But when Instructor Hong heard “Don’t underestimate him,” he hopped up and declared, “I think he’s a fraud. If he dares to spar with me, then I’ll admit that he’s a real arms instructor!”

Chai Jin laughed at that suggestion and said, “Why not? Instructor Lin, what do you think?”

“I would not dare,” Lin Chong said.

Well, Lin Chong was trying to be a good guest, but that Instructor Hong mistook kindness for weakness and thought that Lin Chong was indeed a fraud and was afraid to spar with him. So instead of letting the matter drop, he kept insisting on having a go. For his part, Chai Jin was 1) eager to see Lin Chong show off his skills, and 2) even more eager to see Instructor Hong get put in his place.

“Let’s drink first,” Chai Jin told Instructor Hong. “The sparring can wait until the moon is out.”

After another five or six cups of wine, the moon had climbed high into the night sky, and it was so bright that it lit up the parlor. Chai Jin now got up and said, “Instructors, let us see you have a go.”

But Lin Chong was still thinking to himself, “That Instructor Hong must be Lord Chai’s teacher. It won’t look good if I knocked him down.”

Sensing Lin Chong’s hesitation, Chai Jin said, “Instructor Hong has only been here a short while and has yet to find a worthwhile opponent here. Instructor Lin, please do not refuse. I really want to see both of you show off your skills.”

Chai Jin's words were intended to hint to Lin Chong that there was no need to hold back on account of saving face for him. Thus reassured, Lin Chong consented. Instructor Hong now got up first and said, "C'mon. C'mon. Let's have a go!"

So the whole party moved out to an empty courtyard behind the parlor, and the workhands brought out a bunch of wooden staffs and laid them on the ground.

Instructor Hong took off his outer robe and tied up the skirts of his inner robe. He then picked out a staff and struck a fighting pose, shouting, "C'mon! C'mon!"

Chai Jin urged Lin Chong to accept the challenge. Lin Chong said to him, "My lord, please don't laugh at me." He then picked up a staff and said to Instructor Hong, "Sir, I welcome your critiques."

By now, Instructor Hong was ready to swallow Lin Chong in one gulp, so he was rearing to go. Lin Chong advanced, holding the staff extended in both hands. Instructor Hong made the first move, smacking his staff hard against the ground one time and then charging toward his foe. The two now traded blows under the glow of the moonlight.

But after just four or five bouts, Lin Chong suddenly jumped back and said, "Wait!"

"Instructor Lin, why are you holding back?" Chai Jin asked.

"I'll admit defeat."

"But you two have barely started. Why are you saying you've lost?"

"I'm slowed by this cangue around my neck. That's why I'm admitting defeat."

"Ah yes, I totally forgot about that," Chai Jin said with a laugh. "Well, that's easy enough."

He now told a workhand to go fetch 10 taels of silver, which he took over to the two escorts and said, "May I be so bold as to trouble you to open Instructor Lin's cangue? If there's any question about it at the penal colony tomorrow, just blame it all on me. Here are 10 taels of silver."

So, remember how I said in the last episode that the cangue was sealed by a piece of paper and that no one was supposed to open it until the prisoner had arrived at the exile destination? Well, now we see

how ... umm ... malleable those regulations are. For one thing, the two escorts were so intimidated by Chai Jin's dignified and lofty appearance that they did not dare to refuse him. And besides, there's silver to be had. Who can say no to that? And it's not like Lin Chong was the type who would cut and run as soon as the cangue was off. So one of the escorts opened the cangue.

A delighted Chai Jin now said, "Instructors, let's see you go another round."

Now, when they fought earlier, Lin Chong had been using mostly defensive tactics, so Instructor Hong figured that he had no real skills and was ready to show him up. But just as they were about to square off again, Chai Jin stopped them and told his men to bring out a huge piece of silver. This thing weighed a whopping 25 taels, or more than 2 pounds.

"This match between the two of you is no ordinary contest," he told the two men. "Whoever wins will get this prize."

And just to drive home the point that he REALLY wanted Lin Chong to give it everything he's got, Chai Jin now tossed the giant piece of silver on the ground.

Instructor Hong was already pretty annoyed with Lin Chong coming here at all, since he didn't like competition. And now, there's a giant piece of silver at stake. So he for one was extra motivated. He now struck a powerful fighting pose and followed it up with an opening flourish called "lifting the torch to sear the heavens." The novel doesn't explain what that means, so we'll just have to use our imagination.

On the other side, Lin Chong thought to himself, "Lord Chai obviously wants me to beat him." So this time, he did not hold back. He first held his staff level and showed off a move called "separating the grass to find the snake."

"C'mon! C'mon!" Instructor Hong shouted as he swung his staff down hard. Lin Chong took one step back and dodged the blow. Instructor Hong now charged forward one step, raised his staff, and brought it down again. But this was exactly what Lin Chong wanted. Seeing his opponent was off balance, Lin

Chong now swept his staff upward from the ground. Instructor Hong could not recover in time. He twisted to avoid the blow, but it was too late. Lin Chong's staff cracked him hard across his shin. Instructor Hong went down with a thud, and his staff went flying.

Chai Jin was delighted and immediately ordered his men to bring wine. Everyone had a good laugh. Well, everyone except Instructor Hong, I guess. He couldn't even get up. As a few laughing workhands carried him away, his face was covered with shame, and he limped away from the manor.

Taking Lin Chong by the hand, Chai Jin now accompanied him back to the rear hall to drink some more. He told his men to present the giant piece silver to Lin Chong, but of course Lin Chong would not accept it. But there was no refusing Chai Jin. After much back-and-forth, Lin Chong acquiesced and took the silver, which, hey, good for him. About time something nice happened for this guy.

Chai Jin kept Lin Chong at his manor for a few more days, treating him to fine wine and food every day. After another five or six days, the two escorts went "Ahem" and pointed at their wrist like, "Hey look at the time. Let's not forget we have somewhere to be." So Chai Jin now held another feast to see Lin Chong off.

In addition, Chai Jin also wrote two letters and gave them to Lin Chong. "The prefect of Cangzhou is a good friend of mine," he said. "I'm also tight with the warden and head jailer at the penal colony. When they see these two letters, they will take good care of you."

He then brought out another 25-tael piece of silver and gave it to Lin Chong, as well as another five taels for the two escorts. After another night of feasting, they set out the next morning after breakfast. Chai Jin had his workhands carry the men's luggage, while Lin Chong put his cangue back on.

As they took leave of each other at the manor gates, Chai Jin said to Lin Chong, "I will have someone deliver winter clothes to you in a few days."

“How can I ever repay you, my lord?” Lin Chong said with gratitude. He and the two escorts then offered their thanks, said goodbye, and hit the road again.

It was about noon when they arrived at Cangzhou. Even though this Cangzhou was just a small town, it did have its share of vendors and street markets. The three men went to the prefecture, which was the local courthouse and administrative compound. There, they brought Lin Chong in front of the prefect. The appropriate paperwork was dispensed, indicating that the prisoner had been delivered. The prefect then ordered Lin Chong to be taken to the penal colony, while the two escorts said bye and began their trip back to the capital.

Now, these two escorts will leave our narrative at this point. but remember that they had failed Gao Qiu miserably on the whole “kill Lin Chong somewhere along the way” thing. You would imagine that there would be consequences when they got back to the capital. It’ll take a while, but at some point, we will circle back to what happened to them, so stay tuned.

In the meantime, we’ll follow Lin Chong to the penal colony, which was located outside of town. The compound had tall, strong walls with a deep moat, and it looked like the kind of place where once you went in, the only way you came out was in a bodybag.

Upon arrival, Lin Chong was assigned to a room by himself, where he awaited check-in. While he waited, some of the other prisoners came to pay him a visit and told him, “The warden and head jailer here are very crooked. All they care about is extorting money. If you have money to give them, then they’ll treat you well. But otherwise, they’ll put you in the dungeon, where you would pray for life and long for death. Also, if you grease their palms, they can spare you the initial caning of 100 blows that all new prisoners get. They’d just say that you’re sick and that they’ll get around to the caning later. But if they don’t get a bribe, that caning will leave you more dead than alive.”

So yeah, welcome back once again to the morass that was the Chinese legal system, where, as we see again, corruption and bribery are features, not bugs. Oh and that caning that every new prisoner gets? The Chinese term for that is literally translated as prowess-killing caning, as in they'll beat any trace of defiance out of you, unless you can afford a bribe, of course.

So Lin Chong now asked the other prisoners what the going rate was for a bribe was around here.

"If you want to do it proper, then five taels of silver each for the warden and the head jailer would be about right," they told him.

Just as they were talking, the head jailer came by and asked, "Which one is the new arrival?"

Lin Chong stepped forth and said, "That'd be your humble servant."

But while he was busy greeting the jailer, Lin Chong had not had time to get out any money yet. Seeing a distinct absence of silver, the jailer's face turned dark and he pointed at Lin Chong and cursed, "You damn crook! How dare you not kowtow to me?! I've heard all about your business in the capital. How dare you still put on airs in front of me?! I can read from the lines on your face that you're destined for nothing but hunger the rest of your life. You'll never go anywhere in the world! What you need is lots of beatings! Damn crook! Well, you are in my hands now. I'm going to crush you! You'll see soon enough!" And so on and so forth. As the head jailer kept up his verbal assault, Lin Chong just bowed his head and did not dare to say a word. The other prisoners knew what was good for them and quickly scattered.

After a little while, once the head jailer had let off enough steam, Lin Chong took out five taels of silver and said with a smile, "Brother, a trifling little gift for you. Please don't spurn it for being so small."

Checking out the silver, the jailer asked, "Is this for both me AND the warden?"

"No, it's just for you, brother. Here are another 10 taels of silver. May I trouble you to deliver that to the warden on my behalf?"

Well now, THIS was more like it. In the blink of an eye, the jailer's frown turned upside down, and he smiled at Lin Chong and said, "Instructor Lin, I know about you. I know you're a good man. You must have been framed by Marshal Gao. Put up this suffering for now. You will no doubt make your mark in the future. Judging from your fame and your appearance, you're no ordinary man. You will surely become a high official down the road."

Well, that was a quick about-face. I wonder what caused it. Lin Chong now smiled and replied, "I will depend entirely on your kindness."

"Don't you worry about that," the jailer reassured him.

And just to make sure all his bases were covered, Lin Chong now took out the two letters from Chai Jin and asked the jailer if he could help deliver them to the right hands.

"You've got letters from Lord Chai?! Then you have nothing to worry about!" the jailer said. "Each of these letters is worth an ingot of gold. I'll deliver these for you. In a little while, when the warden comes to check you in, by rule he will order that you receive the caning. But you can just say you fell ill on the way here and that you haven't recovered yet. And I'll cover for you. [whisper] We have to make it look real."

"[Lower voice] Ah, many thanks for the tip," Lin Chong said.

And so the jailer took the silver and the letters and went off. Alone once again, Lin Chong sighed and said, " 'Money makes the world go 'round.' That saying really is the bitter truth." Oh and by the way, that old Chinese saying actually is literally translated as, "With money you can reach the gods."

To see what else money can buy you in the ancient Chinese legal system, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Lin Chong runs into an old friend ... and then runs into some old, umm, let's say non-friends. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!