

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 18.

Last time, Lin Chong had gone to a bandit stronghold on Mount Liang, or Liangshan (2,1), in the middle of a marsh. He was hoping the bandits would let him join their ranks, so that he could have a safe haven. He met one of the bandit leaders, named Zhu Gui, whose job was to conduct recon. Zhu Gui brought him up to the bandit stronghold and introduced him to the other chieftains: Wang Lun, Du (4) Qian (1), and Song (4) Wan (4).

Lin Chong offered up the recommendation letter from Chai Jin, who had bestowed much kindness on the bandit leader Wang Lun, aka the White-Clad Scholar. As he read the letter, Wang Lun offered Lin Chong a seat in the No. 4 position, while Zhu Gui took the fifth seat. Meanwhile, a bandit lackey brought out wine for Lin Chong. After three cups, Wang Lun asked how Chai Jin was doing, and Lin Chong answered that he was spending his time hunting and having fun.

As they chit-chatted, a thought suddenly came to Wang Lun.

“I’m a scholar who did not place on the national exam,” he thought to himself. “I was frustrated and came here with Du Qian to become bandits, and then Song Wan joined us and we gathered all these men here. I have no fighting skills, and Du Qian and Song Wan are just so so. But this Lin Chong used to be a drill instructor with the imperial guard. He must be a good fighter. If he realizes that we aren’t as good as him, he will no doubt try to take our place. How would we deal with him then? Better to find some excuse and send him away now, so as to avoid trouble later. The only thing is it won’t look good with Chai Jin. We would seem like ingrates. But I can’t worry about that now.”

So Wang Lun told his men to arrange a feast to honor Lin Chong. All four chieftains sat with Lin Chong and drank. As the feast was nearing the end, Wang Lun told one of his men to bring out a platter. On this platter were 50 taels of silver and two bolts of silk.

Rising to his feet, Wang Lun said to Lin Chong, “We are honored that Lord Chai recommended you to us. Alas, our humble little fort is small and short on food, housing, and manpower. I worry that we would

ruin your future prospects, and then it won't look good. Here are some trifling gifts. Please accept them and go find a larger place to call home. I hope you will not hold a grudge against us."

Uhh, ruin my future prospects? What the heck are you talking about? Lin Chong was on the run from the law and just wanted a place, any place, where he might be safe. So he said, "Chieftains, please hear me. I have come from afar to place myself under your famed command, hoping that you will take me in as a favor to Lord Chai. I may be untalented, but if you'll have me, I will put my life on the line to serve you with all my heart. It would be my great fortune! I didn't come here for some silver. Please reconsider."

But Wang Lun would not hear of it. He just repeated, "Ours is a tiny place, too small for you. Please don't hold it against us."

But Zhu Gui now chimed in and said to Wang Lun, "Brother, forgive me for speaking up. Even though we don't have that much grain stored up, there are nearby towns and villages where we can go get some. There is plenty of lumber here, enough to build a thousand houses. He came here on the enthusiastic recommendation of Lord Chai. How can we turn him away? Lord Chai has been extremely kind to us. It won't look good if we don't take in someone he recommended. Besides, Lin Chong has skills. He will no doubt be a big help."

Du Qian now also spoke up. "What's one more person? Brother, if we don't take him in, it would be an insult to Lord Chai. We will look like ingrates. He had helped us a great deal in the past, so how can we decline to take in someone that he sent to us?"

The third chieftain, Song Wan, joined the chorus and said, "On account of Lord Chai, we should take him in and let him be a chieftain here. Otherwise, we will look dishonorable and all the heroes on the jianghu (1,2) scene will mock us."

But Wang Lun still would not budge. "Brothers, you don't understand," he said to his fellow chieftains. "Even though he committed a capital offense at Cangzhou Prefecture, we still don't know his true intentions in coming. What if he's here to spy on us?"

What? Man, are you serious?

"I have a death sentence hanging over my head," Lin Chong said. "That is why I have come to join you. Why would I be spying?"

"If that's the case, if you are truly sincere about joining us, then bring us a pledge of membership," Wang Lun told him.

"I do know how to write a few words," Lin Chong said. "Please give me brush and ink and I will write it."

Yeeeah, no, that's not what they had in mind. Zhu Gui smiled and explained, "Drill instructor, you're mistaken. Whenever a hero comes to join us, they must present a pledge of membership. It means you have to go down the mountain and kill someone and bring us their head. That will erase any doubts about your intentions. That's why it's called a pledge of membership."

Lin Chong figured he had come this far, so what's one more life? So he said, "That's not difficult. I'll go down the mountain and wait. But what if no one comes through here?"

Wang Lun said, "I'll give you three days. If you can bring me a pledge within that time, then you can join. Otherwise, don't hold it against me."

Lin Chong agreed and went back to his room to rest, but he was once again quite unhappy. He had come all this way to seek out a refuge of last resort, but even here, among bandits, he had to put up with ridiculous crap like some insecure, no-talent hack questioning his integrity. But it's not like he had any other options, so he had to just grin and bear it.

The next morning, he got up early, ate breakfast, strapped on his short broadsword and grabbed his long-handled broadsword. Then, one of the bandit lackeys accompanied him as a guide and they went

down the mountain, got on a boat, and rowed to the opposite shore. There, they found a secluded spot along a back road and waited for someone to come by.

Hours went by, and no one showed. More hours went by, and still not a soul came through. It was now dusk, and not a single traveler had come down the back road. This was not Lin Chong's lucky day. Dejected, he returned to the stronghold, where Wang Lun asked him, "Where's the pledge?"

"No one came through today, so I couldn't get one."

"[Sigh] Well, if you don't get one tomorrow, it might hard for you to stay here."

Lin Chong did not dare to respond to that dig. He just went back to his room, ate some dinner, and passed the night mired in troubled thoughts.

The next morning, he got up early again and again went down the mountain with his guide. The guide suggested they go wait on the south side of the mountain this time, and so they did, laying low in some woods. The morning again passed without a single soul coming through. But then, around noon time, something stirred in the distance.

Lin Chong looked and saw that it was a group of travelers. That's great news, right? Well, not quite. It was a very large group, about 300-some people in all, coming down the road in one large clump. Lin Chong was good, but he wasn't stupid enough to take on 300 guys by himself. So he had no choice but to let the group pass unmolested.

The rest of the afternoon passed just like the morning, without a single traveler coming through. Lin Chong griped to his guide, "What rotten luck I have! I've waited two days and haven't seen a traveler coming through alone. What should I do?"

"Brother, don't worry yet," the guide said. "We still have one more day. Let's go to the east side of the mountain tomorrow."

When they returned to the stronghold that night, Wang Lun again asked about the pledge, and Lin Chong only responded with a sigh. Wang Lun chuckled and said, "I guess that means you didn't get it today either. I gave you three days, and two have passed. If you don't come up with a pledge tomorrow, there's no need for us to meet again. You can just keep going and find another place."

Yeah, thanks man. That really helps. Lin Chong sat depressed in his room that night. He looked up to the heavens and let out a long sigh. "[sigh] Who knew that thanks to that scoundrel Gao Qiu, there's not even a place for me here. How cruel is fate!"

The next morning, he once again rose at first light. After breakfast, he packed up his stuff, left the bundle in his room, and grabbed his weapons. He and the guide then rowed across the water to a path on the east side of the mountain, where they settled in and waited.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, there was still no sign of any travelers. As the sun moved to directly overhead, the last remnants of snow clouds had been swept away, and the sky was a brilliant blue.

"Looks like it's a bust again," Lin Chong said to his guide. "I might as well get my stuff and leave while it's still light out."

But just then, the guide pointed and said, "Look! There's someone!"

Lin Chong looked and saw a man approaching in the distance, carrying some luggage on a shoulder pole. "At last!" he exclaimed.

When the guy got closer, Lin Chong leaped out with a flourish of his broadsword. The traveler saw him and went, "Oh crap!" He ditched the shoulder pole and the luggage and turned and ran. Lin Chong gave chase, but the guy was a good runner and soon disappeared around a hill.

Ah dammit.

“Look at this!” an exasperated Lin Chong lamented. “What rotten luck! I waited three days before one guy came through, but now he’s gotten away!”

But his guide said, “Even though you didn’t kill him, we did get his luggage. This booty might suffice.”

“Ok, then you carry it back to the stronghold first; I’ll wait a while longer.”

As the guide took the luggage and started back up toward the stronghold, a man suddenly appeared from around a hill. When Lin Chong saw this, he said, “Thank you heaven!”

But this guy was armed with a long-handled broadsword, and a short broadsword hung from his waist. He wore a broad-rimmed felt hat with a red tassel on top, a white silk tunic bound at the waist with a broad band of vertical stitches, leggings of alternating strips of black and white, deerskin socks, and short hairy cowhide boots. He was tall and had a large blue birthmark on his face and sparse, reddish whiskers. His felt hat was pushed far back on his shoulders, his chest was exposed, and a knotted bandanna covered his head.

As this charged toward Lin Chong, he roared like thunder. “Filthy crooks! Where you are going with my stuff?! I was just about to come arrest all of you, and yet you have come to pluck a tiger’s whiskers!”

Lin Chong was like, dude, do you even know how much crap I’ve been putting up with? I am SO not in the mood right now. So he put on his mean face, gripped his long-handled broadsword, and went forward to fight the man. Under the clear sky, next to an ice-covered stream, the two men dueled. Back and forth they went, fighting for 30 bouts with neither gaining the upper hand.

After another dozen bouts or so, a shout suddenly rang out from the mountainside. “Heroes, please stop!”

Lin Chong disengaged and leaped backward, and the other man stopped as well. They looked up and saw Wang Lun, Du Qian, Song Wan, and numerous other bandits coming down the mountainside. They got on boats and rowed across the water, and approached the two men.

“Heroes, what great skills you have with the broadsword!” Wang Lun said. “This man over here is my brother, Lin Chong, aka Panther Head. Sir, you with the blue face, who might you be? Please honor us with your name.”

“My name is Yang Zhi (4). I am descended from three generations of warriors, a grandson of the great general Yang Linggong (4,1), but I have drifted here to west of the pass. In my youth, I passed the military exam and was appointed an aide in the palace. When the emperor was building the Longevity Hill, he sent 10 of us to Lake Tai (4) to collect exotic rock formations and bring them back to the capital to decorate the hill.”

So timeout. This Yang Zhi just rattled off a bunch of stuff that we need to explain a bit. First, he mentioned that he was a descendant of a great general named Yang Linggong (4,1). So let’s go into that a bit. Yang Linggong, which kind of translates to Duke Yang, was an actual historical figure and a legendary general. His actual name was Yang Ye (4), and he lived around the time of the founding of the Song Dynasty. He actually served the last remaining rival kingdom to the Song, but according to legend, the founding Song emperor greatly admired him and, after vanquishing the rival kingdom, convinced him to serve the Song. According to folklore, Yang Ye had a bunch of sons, seven or eight, depending on the source. And all of them were warriors. And this family rendered great service to the Song in defending its northern borders against the kingdom of Liao. Many a folktale has been told about the exploits of this family. Many of those stories, by the way, focused on the women in this family, who were kind of like Amazons in that they were great warriors themselves. It’s an interesting collection of stories, and way too much to delve into in the context of this podcast. So you know, maybe the next podcast. But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves.

Anyway, Yang Zhi also mentioned that he had passed the military exam. Just like how there was a civil service exam to select scholars for government posts, there was a military exam where men could vie to qualify for military positions. And Yang Zhi apparently aced that exam.

He also mentioned something about being sent to fetch rocks for Longevity Hill. Basically what was happening was that the Huizong Emperor was building himself a fancy garden, and he wanted rocks and plants from all around the empire in this garden. So he sent out a bunch of people to go to all corners of the empire to collect those things, and Yang Zhi was one of those.

Now then, let's get back to Yang Zhi's story, which he continued to recount.

"I ran into some bad luck," he said. "When my shipment of rocks was crossing the Yellow River, a strong wind flipped our boat and we lost all the rocks. So I couldn't go back to the capital and instead fled and hid to avoid punishment. But now, our offense has been forgiven, so I scraped together some money and valuables. When I get back to the capital, I'll use them to help me get my former position back. But when we were passing through here, you guys took my stuff. Can you return it?"

"Are you the one they call the Blue-Faced Beast?" Wang Lun asked.

"Yes I am."

"In that case, please come to our stronghold for three cups of cheap wine, and we'll return your luggage."

"Hero, since you know who I am, please return my luggage. That will be better than any wine."

"Sir, many years ago I went to the capital for the civil service exam," Wang Lun explained. "At that time I heard of your great name. It's my fortune to meet you today, so how can I let you leave just like that? Please come to our stronghold for just a bit. We have no hidden agenda."

Now, I can just imagine what Lin Chong was thinking this whole time. I mean, he's been here for days and catching crap left and right from Wang Lun, who, by the way, still hasn't said that he can stay. And now, within minutes meeting this other guy, Wang Lun was being all friendly and hospitable. What the hell?



But anyway, the whole group went back to the stronghold, and Wang Lun even had someone go fetch Zhu Gui from his tavern to join them. They all gathered in the Hall of Honor. The four chieftains sat on the left side, while Yang Zhi and Lin Chong sat on the right, with Yang Zhi in the seat of honor, by the way. Wang Lun then told his men to slaughter a sheep and prepare wine for a feast to welcome Yang Zhi.

As they talked and drank and ate, Wang Lun suddenly got to thinking, "If we keep Lin Chong here, it would not be to our advantage. Why don't I try to keep Yang Zhi, too, and pit them against each other?"

So he pointed to Lin Chong and said to Yang Zhi, "That brother of mine is named Lin Chong. He used to be a drill instructor with the imperial guards. But that scoundrel Marshal Gao cannot tolerate good men and had him exiled to Cangzhou. And then he committed another offense there and so he came here. Sir, you are heading to the capital. It's not that I'm trying to lead you astray, but you, too, have committed an offense. Even though you have been granted amnesty, it will be difficult to regain your former position. Besides, that Gao Qiu controls the military. He will not tolerate you. Why don't you stay here, share our loot and wine and meat, and be an outlaw like the rest of us. What do you think?"

"Sir," Yang Zhi replied, "Thanks to all of you for your kindness. But I have a relative who is still living in the capital. When I was on the run from the law, it caused him some trouble, and I haven't made it up to him yet. I need to go see him. I hope you will return my luggage. Even if you don't, I will go empty-handed."

Wang Lun smiled and said, "Since you don't want to stay, we dare not try to keep you. Please rest here tonight, and resume your journey tomorrow."

Yang Zhi was pleased to hear this, and so they feasted deep into the night before breaking up to rest. The next morning, Wang Lun held another feast to see Yang Zhi off. After breakfast, they had a bandit lackey carry Yang Zhi's luggage, and they all went down the mountain. There, they bid Yang Zhi goodbye and had some lackeys row him across the water to see him on his way.

Only now did Wang Lun say, oh yeah, Lin Chong, you're still here? Alright, I guess you can stay. So Lin Chong stayed, assuming the No. 4 position in the pecking order, just ahead of Zhu Gui. And from that day forth, he became part of the gang, doing what bandits did to make a living.

We will leave Lin Chong's story here for now and follow our newest character, Yang Zhi, the Blue-Faced Beast. After leaving Liangshan, he hired someone to carry his luggage and resumed his journey to the capital Kaifeng. After a few days, he arrived in the city. After finding lodging at an inn and dismissing his porter, he settled in at the inn. After a few days, he called on his connections at the Council of Military Affairs and spent liberally to grease the wheels. After exhausting his entire fortune, he finally managed to get his old job back. The only thing left was to go meet Gao Qiu and get his signature on the official paperwork.

So Yang Zhi went to Gao Qiu. Gao Qiu read over all the documentation about Yang Zhi's history, and then he flew into a rage.

"Ten aides were sent out to collect rocks, and nine of them returned to the capital to complete their assignment," he said. "But you alone lost your load of rocks. And instead of coming to answer for your failure, you fled and eluded capture for a long time. And now you want your old job back? Even though you have been pardoned, we can't hire you back!"

And with one flick of his ink brush, Gao Qiu canceled Yang Zhi's appointment and had him kicked out onto the streets.

So Yang Zhi had come all this way and spent all his money for nothing. He returned to the inn and thought to himself, "Looks like Wang Lun was right. I didn't want to taint my good name by becoming a bandit, and was hoping to use my skills to distinguish myself through service on the borders, win honors for my wife and opportunities for my sons, and bring glory to my ancestors. Who knew that I would be rejected. Marshal Gao, you are too wicked, too petty!"

Now, in the novel, this was portrayed as a grave injustice and yet another wicked example of Gao Qiu's pettiness. But I don't know. The more I think about it, the harder it is to really fault Gao Qiu here. I mean, everything he said was true. Yang Zhi was the only one of the 10 aides who failed in his mission, and instead of coming back to answer for his failure, he did run and hide. And then, after he was pardoned, what did he do? He tried to bribe his way back into his former position. So really, Gao Qiu had a pretty legit reason for refusing to hire him back. But, you know what? Gao Qiu is supposed to be villain in this story, so just roll with it.

Whatever the ethical ramifications were, the practical ramifications were less ambiguous. After a few days, Yang Zhi had spent all his money. Now what?

"I just have this short broadsword," Yang Zhi thought to himself. "It's a family heirloom and has been with me all this time. But alas, I'm in urgent need of money. I have no choice but to try to sell it on the street for a few thousand strings of cash. I can use that as travel money to go somewhere else."

So Yang Zhi tied a straw to the handle of his broadsword, which, if you remember, is the Song dynasty version of the for-sale sign. He then went to a busy street and stood around and waited. And waited, and waited. Four hours passed, and no one even stopped to inquire. So he started walking and headed over to another busy spot near a bridge.

He hadn't been in his new spot for long when suddenly everyone around him ran and hid wherever they could. It was mass chaos, and everyone was running and saying, "Hurry, hide! The tiger is coming!"

"Nonsense!" Yang Zhi said. "How can there be a tiger in the middle of a busy city?"

Just then, he saw a hulking, swarthy man staggering half-drunk in his direction. This guy was rather ugly. He looked to be more ghost than human. His body was covered with sandy rough skin like that of a shark. On his chest was patch of tightly pulled skin, and his forehead was wrinkly. And a foul stench emanated from his body as he walked.

This guy was a well-known riffraff and bully on the streets of the capital. His name was Niu (2) Er (4), and everyone called him Hairless Tiger. He specialized in street thuggery. He had been taken to court a few times, but even the Prefecture of Kaifeng could do nothing to control him. So whenever he appeared, everyone just made sure to stay out of his way.

Everyone, that is, except Yang Zhi. He just remained standing where he was. This Niu (2) Er (4) now approached him, pulled Yang Zhi's broadsword out of its sheath, and asked, "Hey you. How much for this knife?"

To see if Yang Zhi has found a buyer for his family heirloom, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Yang Zhi produces an impromptu infomercial for his sword. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!