

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 19.

Last time, we met Yang Zhi, a warrior with the nickname Blue-faced Beast. He was a palace aide but ended up on the run after literally failing to deliver on a shipment of exotic rocks for the emperor's garden. When we caught up with him, his offense had been pardoned, and he was trying to get his job back. But Gao Qiu, everyone's favorite marshal, rejected his application and kicked him out. So Yang Zhi found himself stranded in the capital, jobless and penniless. He had no choice but to sell the broadsword that was a family heirloom. While he was looking for a buyer, he was approached by a well-known street thug named Niu (2) Er (4). So we'll know, in fact, that his arrival sent everyone else on the street into hiding. Half inebriated, this Niu Er asked Yang Zhi what his price was.

"This is a precious broadsword, a family heirloom," Yang Zhi said. "3,000 strings of coins."

"What?! What knife is worth that much?! I could buy one for 30 coins and it'll do just as well cutting meat and tofu. What makes your knife so great?!"

"This is not a common knife you can buy in a shop. It's a special broadsword."

"What's so special about it?"

"First, it can cut through copper coins without curling the blade. Second, you can blow a hair against it and it will cut the hair in two. Third, you can kill a man with it and it won't stain the blade."

"Oh yeah? Do you dare to demonstrate the copper coin thing?"

"Go get me some coins and I'll show you."

So Niu Er stomped into an incense shop and helped himself to 20 coins. He stacked them up on the railing of the bridge and said to Yang Zhi, "If you can cut through this stack, then I'll give you 3,000 strings for it."

By now, all the other people had come out of hiding and were looking on with curiosity, even though they did not dare to come close. Yang Zhi said, sure no problem. He rolled up his sleeve, gripped the

broadsword, took aim, and with one downward swing, sliced through the entire stack of coins, drawing cheers from all the onlookers.

“Shut your damn mouths!” Niu Er shushed the onlookers and then turned back to Yang Zhi. “What was the second thing you said?”

“If you put a few strands of hair on the blade and give it a light blow, it will split the hairs.”

“I don’t believe you; show me,” Niu Er scoffed as he pulled a few hairs off his own head and handed them to Yang Zhi.

Yang Zhi took the hairs, put them on the blade, gave them a blow, and sure enough, all the hairs were split in two and floated down to the ground. The crowd, which was now growing in size, cheered again.

“What was the third thing?” Niu Er asked.

“You can kill a man with it and it won’t stain the blade.”

“What do you mean?”

“It cuts through someone so fast that blood doesn’t even have time to get on it.”

“I don’t believe you. Show me.”

“We are in the city! How can I kill someone here? If you want a demonstration, then bring me a dog.”

Ok, yeah, there they go with the canine abuse again. And beyond just that, notice that Yang Zhi’s objection wasn’t that he was being asked to kill someone, but that he was being asked to kill someone in the middle of the city. So I guess if they were out in the middle of nowhere, he’d be ok with it?

Anyway, Niu Er was nonplussed with Yang Zhi’s suggestion. “You said kill a man, not kill a dog.”

“Look, if you’re not going to buy, then stop harassing me!” said Yang Zhi, who was starting to lose his patience with this thug.

“Show me!” Niu Er demanded.

“Stop bothering me! I’m not one to be toyed with!”

“What? Do you dare to kill me?!”

“There’s no bad blood between us, so why would I kill you?”

But that street thug just didn’t know when to quit. He now grabbed Yang Zhi and said, “I insist on buying your knife.”

“Then bring me the money!”

“I don’t have any!”

“Then why are you grabbing me?!”

“I want your knife!”

“You can’t have it!”

“If you are a real man, then cut me! C’mon cut me!”

Well, Yang Zhi, like he said, was not one to be toyed with. He had run out of patience, and in the heat of moment, he shoved Niu Er aside, pushing him to the ground. But that thug quickly got to his feet and wrapped himself around Yang Zhi’s waist.

“Neighbors!” Yang Zhi cried out to the onlookers. “You can bear witness: I ran out of travel money, so I came here to sell this broadsword. But this thug is trying to take my sword and is assaulting me.”

Well, that may be, but remember that all the onlookers were afraid of the thug, so nobody intervened. Meanwhile, Niu Er shouted, “You say I’m assaulting you? Well, then I’ll give you a beating!”

As he spoke, he raised his right fist and took a swing at Yang Zhi. In the blink of an eye, Yang Zhi dodged his punch and countered with a quick swing of his blade. It caught Niu Er across his throat, and the thug immediately crumbled to the ground. Yang Zhi’s blood was still up, though, and he stepped forth and stabbed Niu Er twice in the chest, just to finish the job. Soon, Yang Zhi was standing in a puddle of blood, looking down at a dead body.

Ah crap.

So, in a situation like this, the typical instinct for the onlookers was to run away before the authorities showed up, lest they get implicated somehow. This was the ancient Chinese legal system, after all. Knowing this, Yang Zhi shouted, "Sirs, I killed this riffraff, but I will not bring trouble for you! Since this thug is dead, please come with me to the courthouse while I turn myself in."

With that assurance, some of the onlookers followed Yang Zhi to Kaifeng Prefecture. The prefect was in at the moment, so they all went in and kneeled. Yang Zhi laid his broadsword on the ground in front of him and recounted what happened. The witnesses all chimed in and spoke in his favor. After hearing their testimony, the prefect said, "Since you turned yourself in, I will spare you the requisite caning." He then had Yang Zhi locked up in a cangue and dispatched two inspectors to go check out the crime scene. The inspectors took Yang Zhi and the witnesses back to the scene of the murder, took notes, and then wrote it all up. The witnesses all wrote testimonies and were then released. Yang Zhi, meanwhile, was thrown into a cell on death row.

So Yang Zhi might've been in jail, but when all the jailers heard that he was there because he had killed the street thug that everyone feared and hated, they all respected him. They showed that respect by not trying to hit him up for money. Remember all the greasing of palms that Lin Chong had to do at the penal colony to make life a little bit pleasant for himself? Well, Yang Zhi didn't have to do that, and the jailers took good care of him. The merchants from the area where he had killed the thug took up a collection and delivered some money and food for him as thanks for his ridding them of their tormentor. The prosecutor also took into consideration the good that came from his crime, and since the street thug didn't have any family, there was no plaintiff demanding justice. So the sentence got lighter and lighter. In the end, they ruled that he had accidentally killed the thug in a brawl. After staying in jail for 60 days, he was given 20 strokes on his back, a tattoo on his face, and exiled to the garrison at Daming (4,2), aka the Northern Capital. His broadsword, however, was impounded by the court.

After the sentencing, two guards were dispatched to escort Yang Zhi to his exile destination. As they prepared to head out, all the merchants from the bridge came to deliver travel money for Yang Zhi. They also invited the two escorts to a tavern for wine and food, and some money for them as well. They told the escorts, "Yang Zhi is a good man. He rid the people of a menace. Please take good care of him on the journey to Daming."

The escorts told them, yeah we know he's a good man, too, so no worries. Yang Zhi thanked everyone, and the party soon broke up. Yang Zhi and the escorts then fetched their belongings, and Yang Zhi arranged for more wine and food for the escorts, while buying some salves for his wounds from the caning he received. They then set out for Daming. Whenever they passed through a town, Yang Zhi would treat the escorts to wine and food, and they were good to their word and took good care of him. In this way, a few days passed, and they arrived at their destination, Daming.

Now, the governor of Daming was a powerful man who oversaw both military and civilian affairs in the city. His name was Liang (2) Zhongshu (1,1), and he was the son-in-law of Cai (4) Jing (1), the premier. So yeah, take one guess how he came to this position of power. Anyway, on the ninth day of the second month of the year, the escorts brought Yang Zhi to the governor's office and presented the paperwork. Now, this Liang Zhongshu had heard of Yang Zhi when he was in the capital, and after reading the paperwork, he asked Yang Zhi about his story. Yang Zhi recounted how Marshal Gao had refused to give him his old job back, and how he ran out of money and had to sell his broadsword, and yadi yada. After hearing the whole story, Governor Liang was delighted. He immediately had Yang Zhi's cangue removed and kept him around as an aide.

So Yang Zhi had made out alright, all things considering. He attended to the governor day and night, and the governor saw how diligent he was and wanted to promote him to lieutenant and give him a monthly salary. But he was worried that his troops would not take kindly to having a convict promoted

to such a post. He needed a way for Yang Zhi to prove himself to everyone, so he told all the troops that they were having a military tournament on the training outside the east gate the next day.

That night, Governor Liang summoned Yang Zhi and said, "I want to promote you to lieutenant and give you a monthly salary. But I don't know how good your fighting skills are."

"I once passed the military exam," Yang Zhi replied. "And I was a military aide in the palace. I have studied the 18 weapons since my youth. Your act of kindness is like separating the clouds and letting the sun shine through. If I have the opportunity, I will repay you with the devotion of a horse that has been saddled and bridled!"

Governor Liang was delighted by this, and he gave Yang Zhi a suit of armor. The next morning, it was the middle of second month, and the winds were calm and the temperatures were mild. After breakfast, Governor Liang and Yang Zhi mounted their horses and headed to the east gate, surrounded by the governor's entourage.

At the training ground, all the troops were waiting. Governor Liang dismounted, went up to the viewing pavilion and sat down in his command chair. All the military officers then lined up on the two flanks, numbering about 100 in all. At their head were two commanders generals, one named Li (3) Cheng (2), and the other named Wen (2) Da (2). Both were reputed to be valiant warriors. They led all the troops and paid their respects to the governor.

Now, a yellow banner was erected on the pavilion, and 50 pairs of drummers started beating battle drums. After three rounds of drums, the entire training grounds fell silent as they awaited orders. Next, a red banner waved from the pavilion, telling the troops to get into a formation. Five hundred soldiers now lined up in two formations, all wielding weapons. Now, a white banner waved, and two formations of cavalry rode into position and stood at attention.

Governor Liang now summoned a lieutenant named Zhou (1) Jin (3). He galloped out from the right formation, rode to the foot of the pavilion, dismounted, latched his spear, and answered in a thunderous voice.

“Lieutenant Zhou Jin (3),” the governor said, “I wish to see your skills.”

Zhou Jin immediately hopped back on his horse and rode to the front of the pavilion. There, he showed off his skills with the spear, drawing cheers from everyone present.

Next, Governor Liang said, “Where is Yang Zhi, the military transfer from the capital?”

Yang Zhi stepped forward and announced his presence.

“Yang Zhi, I know that you used to be a military aide in the palace. You were exiled here because of a crime. Right now, bandits and rebels are running rampant, and the country is in need of talented men. Do you dare to compete with Zhou Jin (3)? If you beat him, then you can have his position.”

“Benefactor, if that is your command, I will not dare to disobey,” Yang Zhi replied.

So Governor Liang told his men to fetch a horse and weapons for Yang Zhi. Yang Zhi went to the back to don his armor and armed himself with a spear, a short broadsword, and a set of bow and arrows. When he returned to the pavilion, Governor Liang said, “I want to see you and Zhou Jin spar with the spear first.”

Well, Zhou Jin was nonplussed about this upstart convict that for some reason has the governor’s favor and was being positioned to take his job, so he was raring to go. But just then, the general Wen (2) Da (2) said to the governor, “My lord, weapons are blind and should be reserved for killing outlaws and rebels. Today, we are competing amongst ourselves. It would not be good for the army to have our own men wound or kill each other. Why don’t we break off the spear tips, wrap the ends of the shafts with cloth, dip them in lime, and have each man wear a black tunic. Then, after they fight, the man with the most white spots on him is the loser.”

Hey, you know what? That's not a half-bad idea. Wish we had thought of that before the last competition. Oh well. Governor Liang told his men to make it so, and soon, Yang Zhi and Zhou Jin were again ready to go. They mounted their horses and took their places in between the two formations. They then charged at each other and tangled with their tip-less spears. After about 50 bouts, the duel was stopped to check the two men for white spots. Zhou Jin looked like he had spilled a tray of tofu on himself, as he was covered in white spots, probably about 50 in all. Yang Zhi, meanwhile, only had one spot under his left shoulder.

Governor Liang was delighted. He summoned Zhou Jin up to the pavilion and lectured him, "My predecessor made you a lieutenant. But how can you go into battle with such paltry skills? How can you meet the responsibilities of your post?"

So Governor Liang now ordered Yang Zhi to assume Zhou Jin's post. But Li Cheng, one of the top generals, came forward and objected. "Zhou Jin may be rusty with the spear, but he is quite skilled with archery and riding. If you replace him without letting him show those skills, it could hurt the men's morale. What if you have him and Yang Zhi compete in archery?"

"Quite right," Governor Liang said. So he ordered Yang Zhi and Zhou Jin to compete in archery. Now, this wasn't a contest where you each shoot at a target placed some distance away and see who hits the bullseye most frequently. This was a contest where you shoot at each other, while riding. And the whole taking the tip off the weapon trick won't work here since that'll seriously mess up the arrows.

Recognizing this, Yang Zhi bowed to the governor from his horse and said, "My lord, what would happen if someone gets hurt or worse?"

"When military men compete, one does not worry about getting injured. If one of you is skilled enough to kill the other, no questions will be asked."

Well, alrighty then. The two men then assumed their positions. They were each given a shield to defend themselves. Each of them was to take three shots at the other. Yang Zhi graciously offered to let



Zhou Jin go first. Well, Zhou Jin was seething at this point, so he was ready to put a few pointy objects through Yang Zhi. Yang Zhi, being a military man, had already seen through Zhou Jin's so-called skills and was not worried at all.

A blue flag now waved from the pavilion, and Yang Zhi galloped toward the south end of the training grounds. Zhou Jin pursued, latched his reins on the saddle, took the bow in his left hand, and loaded an arrow with his right. He then took aim squarely at Yang Zhi's back and let the arrow fly. Yang Zhi heard the twang of the bow and quickly ducked down over his stirrups, letting the arrow sail past harmlessly.

Seeing his first shot come up empty, Zhou Jin was getting flustered. He pulled out his second arrow, took aim again at Yang Zhi's back, and fired. This time, Yang Zhi didn't bother dodging. When he heard the twang of the bow, he gripped his own bow, gave it a swat, and deflected the incoming arrow.

Now, Zhou Jin was getting worried. By this point, Yang Zhi had reached the end of the training grounds, so he turned around and rode back toward the pavilion. Zhou Jin also rode in that direction. Eight horse hooves pounded on the green grass of the field in pursuit of each other. Zhou Jin now loaded his third arrow, pulled the bowstring back as hard as he could, and then let loose, shooting for Yang Zhi's back again. This time, Yang Zhi quickly turned and caught the arrow in his hand. He then rode up to the pavilion and dropped the arrow on the ground, kind of spiking the football after a touchdown.

Governor Liang was delighted at this display and told Yang Zhi to take his turn. So the blue banner waved again, and it was Zhou Jin's turn to take the shield and ride toward the south edge of the training grounds. Yang Zhi spurred on his horse and gave chase. First, Yang Zhi gave his bowstring a pull without an arrow. When Zhou Jin heard the twang of the bow, he turned and used the shield to deflect the arrow, only to find that none was coming.

"That bastard must only know how to use a spear and not the bow and arrow," Zhou Jin thought to himself. "When he pulls the same trick a second time, I'll call him out and embarrass him. That way, I win."

As he was thinking, his horse had reached the edge of the training grounds, so he now turned and rode toward the pavilion, and Yang Zhi followed. This time, Yang Zhi pulled out an arrow and loaded it onto the bow, but he thought himself, "If I shoot him in the back, it's going to kill him. There is no bad blood between us, so let me shoot him in a non-lethal spot."

And so with his left arm positioned like he was holding up a mountain and his right arm positioned like he was cradling an infant, Yang Zhi pulled his bowstring back all the way and fired. In the blink of an eye, an arrow had lodged itself in Zhou Jin's left shoulder, sending him tumbling off his horse. While the riderless horse galloped past the pavilion, a bunch of soldiers dashed in the opposite direction to tend to Zhou Jin.

Governor Liang was quite pleased with this outcome and immediately ordered Yang Zhi to take Zhou Jin's post. Yang Zhi was elated. He dismounted and went up to the pavilion to thank the governor. But just then, someone stepped out from the left row of officers and shouted, "Not so fast! Let the two of us square off first!"

This guy had a towering stature. He had a round face, large ears, a big mouth with thick lips, bristling side whiskers, and an imposing bearing.

This officer strode over to the governor and said in a loud voice, "Zhou Jin had been sick and has not yet recovered his energy fully. That is why he lost to Yang Zhi. I may be untalented, but I am willing to test my skills against Yang Zhi's. If I let him have any advantage, then he can take my position. And I will not utter a word of complaint even if I die."

So this man's name was Suo (3) Chao (1). He was a captain in the guards regiment. He had an explosive temper, and he was so eager to win glory for the country that he was always first to charge into the fray in battle. For that, he earned himself the nickname the Impatient Vanguard. Hey, he's got a nickname, so you know he's got some skills.

One of the commanding generals, Li Cheng, now approached and said, "Since Yang Zhi used to be a military aide in the palace, he must have good martial skills. We should've known that Zhou Jin would not be a match for him. But Captain Suo (3) would be a perfect match to test his abilities."

Sigh. So Yang Zhi still has one more boss to beat before he could lay claim to his prize. Governor Liang thought to himself, "All the officers are up in arms about my trying to promote Yang Zhi. I might as well let him beat Suo Chao, too. That'll shut them up."

So he summoned Yang Zhi asked if he would be willing to fight Suo Chao, and of course Yang Zhi agreed. Governor Liang told him to go get properly geared up, and even lent Yang Zhi his own horse. Yeah, we're not playing favorites or anything here.

Meanwhile, Li Cheng said to Suo Chao, "You're not like others. Zhou Jin is your disciple and has already lost. If you slip up, too, then that Yang Zhi is going to look down on all the officers here. I have a seasoned warhorse and a suit of armor. You can borrow them. Be careful. Don't lose your prowess."

While the two combatants were getting ready, Governor Liang had his seat moved to the edge of the pavilion so he could get a better view of the duel, and he was followed by the phalanx of officers. He gave the signal, and a red flag waved and drums started to roll. And each of the two formations blasted off a shot from their cannons. When the cannons subsided, Suo Chao galloped into the formation, standing under the main banner. Yang Zhi also galloped into the ranks of the troops and stood behind the banner. A yellow banner now waved, and another round of drums rolled, accompanied by a shout from troops in both formations. After that, the entire training ground became so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Then, a clang of a gong broke the silence, and white banners rose up. All the officers and officials stood at attention in silence.

Now, a blue flag waved from the pavilion, and after three more rounds of drums, the left formation parted, and Suo Chao rode out to the front, reining in his horse and wielding his weapon. He wore a lion helmet of pure steel, with a long red tassel dangling behind. He donned a suit of iron mail, bound at

the waist by a gold-plated girdle with an animal's face. Plates of bronze protected his chest and back, and a pink cape with circular designs was fastened around his neck with cords of green wool. His feet were shod in open lattice-strip leather boots. A bow hung from his left shoulder and a quiver of arrows from his right. In his hands, he wielded a golden axe as he sat astride on a pure white warhorse.

Then, the formation on the right opened up, and Yang Zhi rode out, and he, too, struck an imposing figure. He wore a helmet of steel that gleamed like frost in the sunlight, with a blue tassel trailing behind it. His armor was made up of chain mail in a petal-and-leaf pattern, held in place with a woolen sash. Animal face plates protected his front and back, and over his shoulders hung a white cape with floral design, tied around his neck with purple wool cords. His thick-soled boots were made of brown leather. He wore around him a bow with a leather handle and a quiver of arrows with wedge-shaped heads. In his hand was a steel-inlaid spear of pure iron. And he was riding the governor's flame-colored horse.

Troops on both sides looked upon both men in silent admiration. They haven't seen their skills yet, but these guys sure looked the part. A flag officer now rode forth from the south and shouted, "The governor decrees that you two must approach this duel diligently. If you slip up, you will be punished. Whoever wins will be handsomely rewarded."

And so the two men rode out to the center of the training ground and began to trade blows, pulling out every skill in their repertoire. They fought for 50-some bouts without a winner. On the pavilion, Governor Liang watched with astonishment. And the officers behind him cheered nonstop. In the formations, the soldiers whispered to each other, "We have been serving in the army for years and have gone on campaign several times, but we have never seen such a duel between a pair of heroes!" Even the two commanding generals, Li Cheng and Wen Da, couldn't help but cheer time and again.

To see how this fight will end, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, when there's something strange in your village's waterway, who you gonna call? Why, a

pagoda-lifting strongman with no qualms about offloading your ghost problems onto the neighboring village, of course. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!