

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 21.

Last time, we left Yang Zhi, the Blue-faced Beast, in a pretty good place as he had earned the trust of the governor of Daming (4,2) Prefecture. We then hopped on over to East Bank Village in a little county named Yuncheng (4,2). There, we met a ward chief named Chao (2) Gai (4), who had just received a visitor named Liu Tang, aka the Red-Haired Devil. Liu Tang told Chao Gai that the governor was preparing a ton of valuables to be sent to the capital as a birthday present for the governor's father-in-law, who was the premiere of the imperial court. Both Chao Gai and Liu Tang had thoughts of hijacking that shipment, but before they got down to planning the heist, Liu Tang decided to go settle a score with Lei Heng, aka the Winged Tiger, the constable who had mistook him for a thief the night before and arrested him before Chao Gai saved him by pretending Liu Tang was his nephew and also greasing Lei Heng's palms with 10 taels of silver.

Oh and by the way, if you are feeling overwhelmed by all the names, well, strap yourself in, because we're about to get blitzed with another slew of them in this episode. But to help you keep everyone straight, go over to outlawsofthemarsh.com, where each episode comes with a list of the major characters appearing in that episode, and there is also an overall running list of all the major characters who have appeared in our narrative so far. There's information on each character, such as their nicknames, the weapons they use, and links to pictures and more information on each. Just beware that the links to the Wikipedia entries include lots and lots of spoilers.

Anyway, as we resume our story, Liu Tang had just caught up to Lei Heng and his militiamen, and the two were trash-talking each other, with Liu Tang demanding that Lei Heng return the silver that Chao Gai had given him, to which Lei Heng was like, "Well why don't you come and take it?" And Liu Tang was like, "Maybe I will!" Soon, the war of words escalated into the brandishing of broadswords, which soon turned into the clanging of broadswords as the two men decided to hash out their differences with sharp pointy objects.

Back and forth they went, trading blows in the middle of the road. Soon, they had fought for 50-some bouts without a winner. Lei Heng's 20 militiamen were just about to join in and help their boss when the fence gate at a nearby house swung open and out stepped a man carrying two copper chains.

"Heroes, please stop," the man said. "I have been watching you for a long time. Please take a break and hear me."

As he spoke, he swung a chain between Liu Tang and Lei Heng, and they both pulled back their broadswords and disengaged to see who was meddling in their business. This new character was dressed like a scholar. He wore a cylindrical hat that came down almost to his eyebrows, and a wide flaxen gown with a black border that was tied at the waist with a tea-colored sash. His feet were clad in white socks and silk shoes. He had a handsome and refined face, adorned with a long beard.

This guy's name was Wu (2) Yong (4), and he was nicknamed the Resourceful Star. He is a native of these parts and was renowned in the area for his knowledge and smarts. He now pulled back his copper chains, pointed at Liu Tang, and asked, "Hey you, stop for a second. Why were you and the constable fighting?"

Liu Tang glared at this bookworm and said, "None of your business, pedant!"

Lei Heng, who knew Wu Yong, cut in and said, "Professor, that punk was sleeping half naked in the temple last night and we arrested him. When we took him with us to Ward Chief Chao's estate, we discovered that he was the ward chief's nephew. So we released him on account of his uncle. Mr. Chao treated us to some wine and gave us a little gift. But now this punk has come to demand the gift back without his uncle's knowledge. You tell me: Is he ludicrous or what?!"

When he heard this, Wu Yong thought to himself, "I have known Chao Gai since we were kids. He consults me in matters great and small. I know all his relatives and acquaintances, but I have never seen this nephew. And he doesn't seem to be the right age either. There must be more to this. Let me calm them down and then ask him further."

So Wu Yong said to Liu Tang, "You are misguided, big fella. Your uncle is a friend of mine and good friends with this constable. Since he gave the constable a little gift, you're making your uncle look bad by coming to get it back. Drop the matter for my sake, and I'll clear it up with your uncle."

"Scholar, you don't understand," Liu Tang said. "My uncle didn't want to give him that silver. It was extortion. I swear I will not quit until he gives it back to me!"

"If the ward chief comes to ask for it back himself, then I'll give it back. But I'm not giving it to you!" Lei Heng insisted.

"You wrongly accused me as a thief to extort that silver. How can you not return it?!" an incredulous Liu Tang demanded.

"Nope! No no no no no!" Lei Heng continued.

Wu Yong now tried to intervene again. "You two just fought for a long time without a winner. If you keep fighting, when will it end?"

"If he doesn't return the silver, then I'll fight him to the death!"

"If I'm afraid of you, or if any of my militiamen comes to help, then I'm no hero. I'll cut you down myself!"

"I'm not afraid of you! C'mon! C'mon!"

Welp, here we go again. Liu Tang and Lei Heng were once again gesturing angrily at each other and getting ready to trade blows again. Wu Yong tried to stand between them, but to no avail. Just as the two men were about to have at it again, the militiamen said, "Look, the ward chief is coming!"

From up the road, one could see Chao Gai rushing this way with his robe untied and hanging loose, shouting to Liu Tang, "You rogue! Mind your manners!"

Wu Yong laughed and said, "It'll take the ward chief himself to sort this out."

As he approached, Chao Gai was huffing and puffing, trying to catch his breath.

"What are you doing here fighting with the broadsword?" he asked.

"Your nephew chased us down with weapon in hand, demanding that I return the silver you gave me," Lei Heng said. "I told him, 'I'll give it back to the ward chief, but not you. It's none of your business.' So he and I fought for 50-some bouts before the professor intervened."

"That rogue!" Chao Gai said. "Constable, I had no knowledge of this. Please, on my account, be on your way. I will come apologize to you in person another day."

"I knew that punk was acting on his own devices, so I wasn't about to sink to his level," said Lei Heng, nevermind the fact that he just fought Liu Tang for like 50 bouts. "Sorry you had to come all this way."

And with that, Lei Heng and his men took their leave, with Chao Gai's silver securely in his pockets.

Once they were gone, Wu Yong said to Chao Gai, "If you had not come in person, we would've had a real situation. This nephew of yours is a helluva fighter. I was watching from behind my fence. Even that famous Constable Lei was not a match for him and was on his heel. If they had fought a little while longer, Lei Heng would've lost his life. That's why I rushed out to intervene. Where did this nephew come from? I visit you often but have never seen him."

"Professor, I was just about to invite you to my house to talk about something," Chao Gai said. "But then I discovered that he had gone missing, along with a broadsword from the weapons rack. I heard a young cowherd say that a big guy with a broadsword was heading south, so I chased after him. Thank goodness you intervened. Please come with me to my manor. There's something we need to discuss."

So Wu Yong went back to his study, which doubled as his classroom, hung up his copper chains, and told his landlord, "When my students arrive, tell them that I have business today, so they can have the day off."

He then locked the doors to the study and went with Chao Gai and Liu Tang. When they got back to Chao Gai's manor, they went into a secluded room in the back and sat down. There, Chao Gai

introduced Liu Tang and explained why he had come here. Chao Gai then told Wu Yong, "His purpose in coming matches a dream I had last night. I dreamt that the 7 stars of the Big Dipper had landed on my roof. And then, a small star on the handle turned into a streak of white light and sailed off. In my mind, it has to be a good omen when stars shine on your house. I was just about to consult with you this morning."

Wu Yong smiled and said, "I had a hunch, just based on how suddenly brother Liu showed up. This is a fine idea, but just one thing: For something like this, you need just the right number of people, no more, no less. Even though you have a lot of workhands here, none of them are cut out for this. Right now, it's just the three of us, and that's not enough, even given your skills and brother Liu's. We need seven or eight heroes for this, but no more than that."

"Could this be what my omen of the seven stars was foretelling?" Chao Gai said.

"That dream of yours is quite something," Wu Yong answered. "Could it be that assistance will be coming from the North?"

After pondering for a moment, Wu Yong suddenly said, "I've got it!"

"Professor, if you have trusted men, then go invite them at once so we can do this thing," Chao Gai implored.

"I just thought of three people who are filled with courage and honor and have uncommon fighting skills. And they will brave heaven and hell together. We absolutely need these three men to pull this off."

"Who are they? Where do they live?"

"They are three brothers who live in Stone Tablet Village, which is perched on the edge of the marsh around Liangshan in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. They make their living through fishing and under-the-table business in the marsh. Their family name is Ruan (3). The oldest one is called Ruan (2) Xiao'er (3,2), with the nickname the Immovable Taisui (4,4). The middle brother is named Ruan Xiaowu (2,3), with the

nickname the Reckless Erlang (4,2). The youngest brother is named Ruan Xiaoqi (3,1), with the nickname the Yanluo (2,2) Incarnate. I lived for a number of years in their village and was well-acquainted with them. Even though they were illiterate, I interacted with them because they were honorable men of valor. I haven't seen them in a couple years. If we can get those three, success will be guaranteed."

Ok, I need to pause real quick here for a note on the Ruan brothers' names. Again, they were called Ruan Xiao'er, Ruan Xiaowu, and Ruan Xiaoqi. Ruan, of course, is their family name. The character Xiao (3) means little or young. And the last character of each name, which is the one that distinguishes them from each other, were er, wu, and qi. These mean the numbers 2, 5, and 7. So basically, their names were Young Ruan the Second, Young Ruan the Fifth, and Young Ruan the Seventh. Presumably, that means they were the second, fifth, and seventh child in the family, respectively.

Now, as for their nicknames, they are all references to gods from the Daoist canon. Let's take the oldest brother, Ruan Xiao'er, first. His nickname was the immovable Tai (4) Sui (4). In Daoist mythology, a Tai Sui was a heavenly general and a personification of one of 12 stars that were thought to be opposite Jupiter. These 12 stars correspond to 12 years it takes for Jupiter to orbit the sun, which is why the Chinese zodiac is a 12-year cycle. So each of these Tai Sui generals corresponds to a year in the cycle. Now, here's the really funky part. Whoever's year it was, it was believed that a corresponding supernatural meat-like clump of fungus would grow on earth, and you do NOT want to mess with this trippy mushroom, or bad things would happen to you. In fact, there's a Chinese saying: "Disturbing the soil on top of a Tai Sui," and it means looking for trouble. So Ruan Xiao'er nickname basically suggests that he was not one to be trifled with.

Now, Ruan Xiaowu's nickname, the Reckless Erlang, is a reference to Erlang, a deity who has a third eye that can see the truth. This deity is also associated with several mythical folk heroes who helped control torrential flooding at various points in Chinese history. So this nickname could be an indicator of Ruan Xiaowu's skills in the water, and the Reckless part is probably a reference to his personality.

Finally, Ruan Xiaoqi's nickname, Yanluo Incarnate, is a reference to Yanluo, the king of the underworld in Daoist mythology. So it's kind of like Devil Incarnate. Again, not someone you want to run afoul of.

So anyway, after Wu Yong mentioned the three Ruan brothers, Chao Gai said, "I have heard of them too, but haven't met them. Stone Tablet Village is only 30 miles or so from here. Why don't we send someone to invite them here to discuss this matter?"

"If you just send a servant, they will not come," Wu Yong said. "I must go in person and use the power of my words to convince them to join us."

"Great idea! When can you leave?"

"We cannot afford any delay. I will leave at midnight tonight and be there by noon tomorrow."

"Perfect!"

And so Chao Gai now arranged for a meal for his two guests. As they ate, Wu Yong said, "I have made the trip between Daming and the capital Kaifeng. We don't know which route the convoy delivering the birthday gift is taking. Brother Liu Tang, we'll have to trouble you to go find out when the convoy is leaving and which way they are going."

"I'll go tonight as well," Liu Tang said.

"Not so fast," Wu Yong said. "The premier's birthday is the 15th day of June. It's only early May right now. There are still 40-some days. Wait until I have recruited the Ruan brothers, and then you can go."

"Quite right," Chao Gai chimed in. "Brother Liu, you stay here with me for now."

So it was decided. Around midnight, Wu Yong got up, washed up, ate a little breakfast, borrowed some money from Chao Gai, put on some hemp sandals, and set out toward Stone Tablet village. He arrived around lunchtime. It was scenic little place, with green peaks and ridges in the distance,

surrounded by water on all sides. Fishing boats sat here and there, and fishing lines and nets hung between willow trees.

Having lived here, Wu Yong knew the way, so he headed to the home of Ruan Xiao'er, the oldest of the three brothers. When he got there, he saw a number of small fishing boats tied up to a post on the bank, while a tattered fishing net hung drying in the sun and a dozen or so thatched houses sat against a backdrop of water and mountains.

"Brother Xiao'er, are you home?" Wu Yong asked aloud.

With that, a man walked out. He had erect eyebrows, a bare chest covered with yellow hair, a broad back, powerful arms, and eyes that shot out cold light. His hair was tied up with a torn towel cloth, and he wore a set of old clothes with bare feet.

"Professor, what brings you here?!" Ruan Xiao'er asked with surprise.

"I have some business and have to come ask you for a favor."

"Whatever it is, I'll take care of it."

"It's been two years since I left here," Wu Yong said. "Right now, I am a tutor in the home of a wealthy man. He's planning a banquet and wants more than a dozen golden carps, each weighing about 14 or 15 catties, so I have come to you."

Fifteen catties, by the way, is almost 20 pounds, so we're talking about some big fish here.

Ruan Xiao'er chuckled and said, "Let's have a few cups of wine and then talk."

"Yes, that's the other part of my coming to you, too," Wu Yong said.

"There are a few taverns on the other side of the lake," Ruan Xiao'er suggested. "How about we ride over there on a boat?"

"Perfect. I also want to catch up with your brother Xiaowu. Is he home?"

"Let's go see."

So the two men went to the bank and untied one of the small boats. Ruan Xiao'er helped Wu Yong into the boat and then grabbed an oar lying beneath a tree and rowed into the lake. As he was rowing, Ruan Xiao'er suddenly waved and shouted, "Hey, Xiaoqi. Have you seen your brother?!"

Wu Yong looked in the direction that he was shouting at, and from among the reeds a small boat emerged, rowed by a man who had odd facial features, bulging eyes and a yellow-ish beard. His skin was marked with black spots, and he had muscles so firm that he looked like he was made of copper. He wore a black straw hat with a wide brim, a checkered vest and an apron. This was Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest of the brothers. He stopped his boat and asked, "What do you want with Brother Xiaowu?"

Wu Yong now shouted, "Brother Xiaoqi, I have come to talk to you guys."

"Oh, professor. My apologies! I haven't seen you in so long!"

"Come get a drink with us," Wu Yong said.

"I've been wanting to drink with you, professor, but we never see each other anymore."

So now, Ruan Xiaoqi steered his boat alongside his brother's and they soon rowed to a stretch of seven or eight thatched huts, elevated above the water.

"Mom! Is Xiaowu at home?" Ruan Xiao'er shouted.

"He won't listen to anything I say," their mother replied. "He hasn't been catching anything and has been gambling day after day and losing every coin. Just now, he took my hairpin and went to the gambling house again."

Ruan Xiao'er chuckled and pushed his boat away. Ruan Xiaoqi followed in his boat and said, "My brother, I don't why, but he keeps losing at the gambling house, but he never gets discouraged. But he's not the only one. I've been losing my shirt, too."

When Wu Yong heard this, he thought to himself, "This is too perfect."

The two boats now rowed toward the little market town nearby. After an hour or so, they spotted a man next to a single-plank bridge, holding two strings of coins and getting into his boat.

"There he is," Ruan Xiao'er said.

Wu Yong looked and saw that this man had arms that looked like steel staffs and eyes that resembled copper coins. His face may have a trace of a smile, but also hints of a killer. He, too, had his hair tied up in a bun with a tattered, tilted bandanna, and he had a pomegranate flower tucked behind his ear. His old tunic was open, revealing a blue panther tattoo on his chest. And his plain trousers were tied at the waist with a checkered towel.

"Brother Xiaowu, did you win?" Wu Yong shouted.

"Oh, professor, it's you! Haven't seen you in two years. I've been waiting for you guys on the bridge for a while."

"We went to your house to look for you," Ruan Xiao'er said. "Mom said you had gone to town to gamble, so we came here to look for you. Let's go to that tavern over the water to get a drink."

So Ruan Xiao'wu rushed into his boat and the three boats now rowed on to a nearby tavern overlooking the water. They steered into a lotus-flower-covered pond next to a pavilion over the water and hitched their boats. They then helped Wu Yong onto land and they all went into the tavern and sat down at a red table with benches.

"Professor, please forgive our crude manners and take the seat of honor," Ruan Xiao'er said.

"No no, that won't do," Wu Yong protested.

"Brother, just take the seat of the host," Ruan Xiaoqi said to Ruan Xiao'er. "Have the professor take the seat of the guest, and then the other of us will sit wherever."

"Brother Xiaoqi always cuts to the chase," Wu Yong said with a smile.

After the four sat down, they asked the waiter to bring a bucket of wine. The waiter also set out four big bowls, four sets of chopsticks, and four plates of vegetables.

"What kind of food do you have?" Ruan Xiao'er asked.

"We just butchered an ox. It's nice and fat," the waiter said.

“Ok, bring us 10 catties, cut into large pieces.”

Ruan Xiaowu now said to Wu Yong, “Professor, please don’t laugh at us. We don’t really have any delicacies to treat you.”

“Oh no. I have imposed on you guys,” Wu Yong said.

“Nonsense!” Ruan Xiao’er chimed in.

Soon the beef was brought out on two plates and set on the table. The Ruan brothers let Wu Yong have first dibs. He was full after just a few pieces, and then, the three brothers pounced on the meat with tiger-like ferocity.

“So, professor, what brings you here?” Ruan Xiao’wu, the middle brother, asked.

“He’s a tutor at a rich man’s home now,” Ruan Xiao’er explained. “He needs a dozen or so golden carps, weighing 14 or 15 catties each. So he came to us.”

Ruan Xiaoqi said, “In the past, it wasn’t unusual to catch 30 to 50 such fish at one time, much less a dozen. But now, it’s hard to even get fish that weigh 10 catties.”

“Well, the professor has come all this way,” Ruan Xiaowu chimed in, “so no matter what, we can at least come up with a dozen or so that weigh five or six catties for him.”

“I have brought plenty of money,” Wu Yong said, “but I don’t want small fish. I need fish that are 14 to 15 catties.”

“[Sigh] Professor, there’s nowhere to get those,” Ruan Xiaoqi explained. “Even the 5 or 6-catty ones that my brother just mentioned will take a few days to get. Oh, that reminds me, I have a bucket of small live fish in my boat. We can have them with the wine.”

So Ruan Xiaoqi went and fetched the bucket of fish, which weighed a total of five or six catties, and cooked them himself on the tavern’s stove. He put them into three plates and brought them to the table.

“Professor, just have a little bit. It’s not much.”

So the four of them ate some more, and by now, the sky was starting to dim. Wu Yong thought to himself, "This tavern is no place to talk. It looks like I'll be staying with them tonight. I'll talk to them there."

Just then, Ruan Xiao'er said, "Professor, it's getting late. Please stay at my house tonight, and then we'll worry about this in the morning."

"I have come all this way and it's a rare opportunity to get all three of you together," Wu Yong said. "It looks like you won't be letting me pay for this meal. Since I'm staying at Xiao'er's place tonight, then here, I have some silver. Let's buy a jug of wine and some meat from this tavern, and then find a chicken somewhere in the village, and drink to our heart's content tonight. What do you think?"

"There's no need for you to spend your money," Ruan Xiao'er said. "We can take care of it. Don't worry about it."

"I came specifically to treat the three of you," Wu Yong said. "If you won't let me, then I guess I'll have to take my leave."

Ah yes, the good ol' Chinese ritual of "Here let me get the bill." "No no, I've got it. I insist."

Well, Ruan Xiaoqi was not one for such back and forths. He said, "Since the professor has offered, then let's just take him up on it and get him back some other time."

"See, Xiaoqi is always so straightforwad," Wu Yong said. So he gave Ruan Xiaoqi a tael of silver and asked him to buy a jug of wine, 20 catties of cooked beef, and a pair of chickens.

"Take what I owe you out of that, too," Ruan Xiao'er told the tavern keeper.

"Perfect," the keeper said.

So the four men left the tavern with their takeout, returned to the boats, and rowed back to Ruan Xiao'er's home. There, they sat down on the ground behind the house and asked for the lamps to be lit. Ruan Xiaoqi killed the chickens and handed them to Ruan Xiao'er's wife to prepare. Of the three Ruan

brothers, Ruan Xiao'er, the oldest, was the only one who was married. So his wife and little boy now busied themselves in the kitchen while the four men sat around a table in the pavilion behind the house, overlooking the water. After a couple hours, all the food and wine were on the table.

Wu Yong now offered the brothers a few cups of wine and then brought up the matter of acquiring the fat carps again.

“You have such a huge fishing ground here, how can you not have any big fish?” he asked.

To see the Ruan brothers' explanation for their collapsed fishery, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, are you ready for more names? I hope you are, because we've got them. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!