

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 22.

Last time, Chao Gai and Liu Tang were planning to hijack the convoy of birthday presents meant for the premier. They brought this idea to the brains of the operation, a local scholar named Wu Yong. Wu Yong suggested that they needed seven or eight bodies to pull this off, but not just any bodies. To that end, he went to recruit three fisherman brothers in Stone Tablet Village: Ruan Xiao'er, Ruan Xiaowu, and Ruan Xiaoqi.

As we rejoin the narrative, Wu Yong was spending the night with the three Ruan brothers, and they were drinking and feasting over dinner at the home of one of the brothers. After a few cups, Wu Yong once again broached the pretext of his visit -- that he was there to secure a bunch of big fat juicy fish for a wealthy patron. But the Ruan brothers told him that such big fish were no longer available in these waters.

"But you have such a large fishing ground here," Wu Yong asked, "How come you can't find big fish?"

"To tell you the truth, professor," said Ruan Xiao'er, the eldest brother, "such big fish can only be found in the waters around Liangshan. The lake around this village is too small for fish that big."

"Well, the marsh around Liangshan is not far from here, and the two bodies of water are connected," Wu Yong said. "So why don't you go there to get some fish?"

"[Sigh] Don't even ask," Ruan Xiao'er sighed.

"What's wrong?" Wu Yong inquired.

Ruan Xiaowu, the middle brother, now chimed in. "Professor, you haven't heard. That marsh around Liangshan used to be our lifeline, but now we don't dare to go."

"It's such a big place. Don't tell me that the authorities have banned fishing there."

"[Scoff] What authorities?! I like to see them try to keep us from fishing!"

"Then what is it?"

“You haven’t heard?”

“No.”

The youngest brother, Ruan Xiaoqi, now cut in and explained, “It hurts to say it. But a gang of bandits have taken over the marsh, and they don’t allow any fishing.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that. I haven’t heard about the bandits.”

Ruan Xiao’er now continued. “Their leader is a scholar who didn’t place on the civil service exam, called Wang Lun, the White-clad Scholar. The second chieftain is called Du Qian, the Skyscraper. The third is Song Wan, Giant in the Clouds. There’s also a Zhu Gui, the Dry-land Alligator, who’s operating a tavern at the entrance to the Li (3) Family Lane and running reconnaissance. Those guys aren’t much to worry about. But recently, they added a new guy, somebody named Lin Chong, the Panther Head. He used to be a drill instructor for the imperial guards and is a great warrior. This gang of outlaws have gathered about 700 men and are looting, pillaging, and robbing passersby. We haven’t gone that way to fish in more than a year. Right now, they control the marsh and have cut off our living. That’s why it’s such a long story.”

“Wow, I didn’t know about any of that,” Wu Yong said. “So why haven’t the authorities gone to arrest them?”

“The authorities?” Ruan Xiaowu scoffed again. “All they know how to do is disturb the civilians. If they come to your village, they’ll eat all your pigs, sheep, chickens, and geese, and extort money from you. Well now with this gang of bandits here, none of those cops dare to come here! And if their superiors order them to come, they are so scared that they just crap their pants! They can’t do nothing against the bandits!”

Ruan Xiao’er chime in and said, “So even though we can’t catch any big fish, at least we also don’t have to pay taxes or do any forced labor.”

“Well, it sounds like those bandits have it made,” Wu Yong said.

“They are not afraid of anything or anyone,” Ruan Xiaowu said. “They share wealth by the handful, wear fancy clothes, drink wine by the jug, eat meat in large pieces. So yeah, they are living the high life. We three have tons of skills, and yet we can’t live like they do.”

Well well, Wu Yong thought, this is all coming together nicely.

Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest brother, now said. “Hell, you only live once. We waste our lives fishing. What I won’t give to live like those bandits for just one day.”

“Live like them? Why?” Wu Yong asked, feigning surprise. “What they do would earn them punishments far more severe than just a caning. They’re throwing away their valor. And if they get caught by the authorities, they would have brought it upon themselves.”

“[Scoff] Right now the authorities don’t know good from bad,” Ruan Xiao’er scoffed. “How many who have committed grave offenses have gotten off scot free? And yet we can’t live a decent life. If someone was willing to lead us, we might just go rogue, too.”

“That’s what I think about all the time, too,” Ruan Xiaowu said. “Our skills are not beneath anyone else’s. But who recognizes that?”

“If someone does recognize your worth, you really would do it?” Wu Yong asked.

“If they recognize our talent, we would go wherever, do whatever,” Ruan Xiaoqi declared. “Just so long as we can put our talent to good use for one day, we would die content.”

Wu Yong was secretly rejoiced and thought, “They’re all nibbling now. Let me reel them in slowly.”

After a few more cups of wine, Wu Yong asked, “Do you three dare to go up to Liangshan to catch those bandits?”

“Catch them? Even if we do, where would we go to claim a reward?” Ruan Xiaoqi said. “All it would do is make us laughingstocks among the heroes of the land.”

“This may be a stupid question,” Wu Yong said. “But if you’re fed up with fishing, then why don’t you go join the bandits?”

“Professor, to be honest, we’ve actually talked about that a few times,” Ruan Xiao’er told him. “But some people from that gang have told us that their leader, Wang Lun, is the small-minded, jealous type and cannot tolerate people. When that Lin Chong joined them, he had to put up with all sorts of crap. That Wang Lun is not one to take people in easily. That’s why we are discouraged about going there.”

Ruan Xiaoqi broke in. “If only they were as big-hearted and fond of us as you are, professor.”

Ruan Xiaowu also joined in and said, “If that Wang Lun was anything like you, professor, we would have gone to him long ago and would not be here now! And we three would die willingly for him.”

Wu Yong laughed and said, “Me? What am I when there are so many heroes right now in the provinces of Shandong and Hebei?”

“That may be, but we haven’t met them,” Ruan Xiao’er lamented.

Haven’t met one, eh? Wu Yong sensed his opportunity.

“What about Chao Gai, from right here in East Bank Village in Yuncheng County? Do you guys know him?”

“The one they call the Pagoda-Lifting Heavenly King?” Ruan Xiaowu asked.

“The very same.”

“Even though we are only 30-some miles from him, we haven’t had the good fortune to meet him,” Ruan Xiaoqi said.

“He is generous and chivalrous, a real man. You should go meet him,” Wu Yong said.

“Well, we haven’t had any reason to go there, so we haven’t met him yet,” Ruan Xiao’er told him.

And now, Wu Yong finally showed his hand, well, sort of.

“I have been doing some teaching around his estate in recent years. I’ve found out that he has a valuable convoy coming, so I have come to talk with you guys about hijacking it midway. What do you think?”

“No, that won’t do,” Ruan Xiaowu objected. “Since he’s a generous and chivalrous man, if we go muck up his affairs, we will be the laughingstock of the whole jianghu scene.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize how principled you guys are,” Wu Yong said. “Alright then, if you’re sincere, then I’ll be straight with you. Right now, I am staying with Chao Gai. He has heard of your reputation and asked me to come to talk to you.”

“We are absolutely sincere, without even a hint of pretense!” Ruan Xiao’er declared. “I’m guessing Ward Chief Chao has some illicit dealing that he wants to bring us in on, so he has asked you to come recruit us. If that’s the case, then we three will put our lives on the line to help him. I swear on what remains of our wine here: If we break our word, then may we be beset with calamity, afflicted with terrible diseases, and die a horrible death!”

At that, his two younger brothers smacked their hands on the back of their necks and said, “We will sell this hot blood to one who recognizes our worth!”

Things were going exactly according to Wu Yong’s plan. He now told the brothers, “I really did not come here to trick you. But this is no small matter. The premier, Cai Jing, is celebrating his birthday on June 15th. His son-in-law is the governor of Daming (4,2) Prefecture and has prepared valuables worth 100,000 strings as a birthday gift. A hero named Liu Tang brought word of this to us, and we want to ask you to join us and gather up a few good men to hijack this ill-gotten wealth so that we can all live the high life. That’s why Ward Chief Chao sent me here on the pretense of buying fish, so that I can talk to you about it. What do you think?”

When he heard this, Ruan Xiaowu said hellz yeah! And then he turned to his younger brother Ruan Xiaoqi and said, “What did I tell you?!”

Ruan Xiaoqi jumped up and said, "Our lifelong wish has been fulfilled! This is scratching my itch! When do we leave?!"

"Tomorrow morning at 5 a.m., let's all go to Chao Gai's estate," Wu Yong said, much to the delight of the three brothers.

So the next morning after breakfast, the three brothers set out with Wu Yong and walked toward East Bank Village. It took all day, but as they approached the manor, they saw Chao Gai and Liu Tang in the distance, waiting under a green locust tree. They greeted each other under the tree, and Chao Gai was delighted.

"You three heroes truly live up to your reputation!" he told the Ruan brothers. "Please come inside to talk."

So they went into the rear parlor and sat down as host and guests. Wu Yong recounted what happened, and Chao Gai was ecstatic about the Ruan brothers agreeing to help with the heist. He ordered his men to slaughter pigs and sheep and prepare some sacrificial money.

For their part, the Ruan brothers were quite impressed with Chao Gai's sincerity and said, "We love meeting heroes. Turns out there was one right here. If not for the professor's guidance, how could we have ever met?" And so the brothers ate, drank, and talked happily all night.

The next morning, sacrificial items, incense, and cooked meats were laid out in the rear parlor. Everyone was delighted by Chao Gai's sincerity. And together, they swore the following oath:

"Liang Zhongshu (1,1) preys upon the civilians of Daming (4,2) and extorted their money to deliver to Cai Jing as a birthday gift. This is ill-gotten wealth. If anyone among the six of us holds any selfish intent, let Heaven and Earth obliterate him! May the gods be our witness!"

After the oath, they burned the sacrificial paper money as an offering to the gods, and then got down to drinking to celebrate their new partnership. Just then, a workman came to report that a priest was outside, asking for food and wanting to speak to Chao Gai.

“You’re so dense!” Chao Gai scolded him. “Can’t you see I am entertaining guests?! Just give him some rice and be done with it. No need to ask me!”

“I already gave him rice,” the workhand said. “But he declined and insisted on seeing you.”

“He must think it was too little. Go give him some more. Tell him that I am entertaining guests and cannot see him.”

So the workhand went to do what he was told, but soon came back and said, “I offered that priest more rice, but he still refuses to leave. He said he didn’t come for rice; he just came to see you.”

“You are so dim. Just say I really don’t have time to see him today. Tell him to come back another day and I will welcome him with tea.”

“I told him that, but he said, ‘I’m not here for rice or money. I came because I heard the ward chief is a man of honor and I wanted to see him.’ ”

“You’re annoying me!” Chao Gai grumbled. “You don’t know how to help me at all! If he still thinks what we’re offering is too little, then give him more rice. No need to come talk to me again. If I didn’t have guests, it’s no big deal to go see him quick. Just go deal with him, alright? Don’t bug me anymore!”

So the workhand went off, and before long, you could hear a ruckus breaking out from the front entrance, and another workhand rushed in and said, “That priest got pissed off and beat up more than 10 guys.”

Now THIS caught Chao Gai’s attention. He quickly got up and told his companions, “Brothers, stay here for a moment. Let me go take a quick look.”

He went to the front of the manor and saw a tall Daoist priest with strange features, whupping a bunch of workhands under the green locust trees outside the manor gates. His hair was tied up in two

buns. He wore a short Daoist robe tied at the waist with a multi-colored sash. On his back he wore a bronze sword with pine bark pattern carvings. He wore hemp sandals and held a fan made of feathers. As he beat the workmen, he cursed them and said, "You guys can't tell good from bad!"

"Sir, please calm down!" Chao Gai shouted. "What could you want with the ward chief if not food? He has already given you rice. Why are you causing such a ruckus?"

The priest, however, laughed out loud and said, "I did not come for wine, food, rice, or money. Even 100,000 strings of coin would be nothing to me. I have come with the expressed purpose of speaking to the ward chief. But these country bumpkins were so rude and cursed me, so I lost my temper."

"Do you recognize Chao Gai?"

"I have only heard of him. I have not met him."

"Well, here I am. Sir, what did you want to say to me?"

The priest sized up Chao Gai and quickly said, "My apologies, and my respects."

"Sir, how about you come in for a cup of tea?"

"Much obliged."

And so the two men went inside the manor. Meanwhile, from the back parlor, Wu Yong saw them come in and immediately told everyone back there to make themselves scarce, including himself. Chao Gai now led the priest into the back parlor and sat down. After tea was served, the priest said, "This is no place to talk. Is there somewhere more private?"

So Chao Gai led him to a small room and they sat down again. Now, Chao Gai asked the priest who he was.

"My last name is Gongsun, and my first name is Sheng (4). My Daoist name is Master Singular Clarity. I have loved practicing with weapons since my youth and have learned much martial arts. Because I also learned some Daoist magic and can control the weather, on the jianghu scene I am known



as Dragon in the Clouds. I have long heard of Ward Chief Chao Gai of East Bank Village in Yuncheng County, but have not had the pleasure to meet you. Today, I am coming to offer you valuables worth 100,000 strings of coins as an introduction gift. Will you accept?”

At this, Chao Gai laughed out loud and said, “Sir, are you referring to a certain convoy of birthday gifts coming from the north?”

“How do you know that?!” Gongsun Sheng asked with surprise.

“I was just guessing. Am I right?”

“You must not miss this opportunity,” Gongsun Sheng said. “As the ancients said, ‘If you don’t take it when you should, then you can’t regret it later on.’ What do you think?”

Just then, someone stormed in from outside, grabbed Gongsun Sheng by the chest and said, “Well well! How dare you conspire about such dealings in the light of imperial and heavenly laws?! I have heard everything!”

Startled, Gongsun Sheng’s face turned to the color of ash. But Chao Gai just laughed. The man who stormed in was just Wu Yong.

“Professor, no need to worry. Let’s have an introduction,” Chao Gai said.

“I have long heard of Gongsun Sheng, the Dragon in the Clouds,” Wu Yong said as he greeted the priest. “I never expected to meet you here today.”

Chao Gai then introduced Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng said, “I have also long heard of you, sir. Who knew that destiny would bring us together here? It must be because Ward Chief Chao is honorable and generous, and so all the heroes of the land gather in his home.”

“There are a few more in the back,” Chao Gai told him. “Let’s go meet them.”

And so they returned to the back parlor to meet Liu Tang and the Ruan brothers. And everyone agreed that this gathering was no chance meeting, but rather the will of heaven. They all now asked Chao Gai to take the top seat.

“I’m but a poor host, how can I dare to take the lead?” he said.

“Brother, you are the oldest. Listen to me and take your seat,” Wu Yong said.

So Chao Gai assumed the first seat, followed by Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Liu Tang, and then the three Ruan brothers, totaling seven men in all. They then resumed their feasting.

As they drank, Wu Yong said, “Brother Chao dreamed about the seven stars of the Big Dipper descending on his roof, and now today, the seven of us are gathering here to pursue a great enterprise. This is the work of heaven! This bounty will be ours for sure. As I said a couple days ago, we need Brother Liu Tang to go find out which way the convoy is coming. It’s too late today, but he should go tomorrow morning.”

“No need for that,” Gongsun Sheng said. “I have already found out. They are coming on the main road through Yellow Earth Ridge.”

That reminded Chao Gai of something. “A few miles east of Yellow Earth Ridge is Anle (1,4) Village,” he said. “There is an idler there named Bai (2) Sheng (4), and he’s nicknamed the Daylight Rat. He came to stay with me before and I helped him out with some money.”

Now, I should note that this guy’s last name, Bai, means white. And that prompted Wu Yong to say, “Could it be that the white light on the handle of the dipper in your dream is referring to this guy? I think I have a use for him.”

Liu Tang asked, “Yellow Earth Ridge is quite a ways from here. Where could we stay?”

“We can stay at Bai Sheng’s home,” Wu Yong said. “And we can put him to good use, too.”

“Professor,” Chao Gai asked, “Are we taking the loot by brawn or by brain?”

“I’ve already got a plan. We’ll just see how the convoy is traveling. If they’re traveling in force, then we’ll take it by force. If they’re trying to be sneaky, then we’ll be sneaky, too. Let’s see what you think of this plan.”

So Wu Yong proceeded to explain his strategy, but of course, as you know from all the Ocean's 11 films, the movie should not explain the plan until after the heist has been pulled. And so we'll honor that tradition here and keep the plan a secret for now. But suffice it to say, Chao Gai was so delighted that he stamped his foot and said, "Great plan! No wonder people call you the Resourceful Star! You are truly smarter than Zhuge Liang. What a great plan!"

Oh and by the way, Zhuge Liang was a historical figure from the Three Kingdoms era. He was the prime minister of one of the three kingdoms. And in the novel the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, he was portrayed as a supernaturally brilliant tactician. So this was high praise indeed.

Wu Yong now cautioned, "Do not speak of this again. The walls have ears. We must keep it between us."

Chao Gai said, "Let's have the three Ruan brothers return to their village for now and come back here on the appointed date. Professor, you can go back to teaching. Master Gongsun, Brother Liu Tang, you two stay here for now."

And so it was settled, and everyone returned to their guest quarters to rest after the feast was over. The next morning, they all rose at 5 a.m. and had breakfast. Chao Gai then took out 30 tales of silver and offered them to the Ruan brothers.

"This is just a token of my appreciation. Please accept it," he told them.

The Ruan brothers steadfastly refused, but Chao Gai insisted, and Wu Yong helped out by saying, "It's an act of friendship. Please do not decline." Only then did the Ruan brothers accept the money. Wu Yong then whispered something in their ears and told them, "Don't miss the deadline." The Ruan brothers then took their leave and returned to Stone Tablet Village. Gongsun Sheng and Liu Tang stayed on at Chao Gai's manor, while Wu Yong dropped by often to discuss matters.

Now then, let's skip on back over to Daming Prefecture, where Governor Liang had just finished putting together that hefty birthday gift for his father-in-law. One day, as he sat with his wife, Lady Cai, she asked him when the gifts would be delivered.

"All the presents are ready," he told her. "The convoy will set out the day after tomorrow. But there's just one thing I'm still going back and forth on."

"What is it?"

"Last year I wasted 100,000 strings' worth of valuables. I didn't appoint the right people to deliver them to the capital, and they got hijacked by bandits midway and we still haven't caught the perps. And this year, I'm again struggling to find someone who's up to the task. That's what I'm trying to figure out."

His wife pointed to someone nearby and said, "You're always singing his praises, so why don't you send him? He should get the job done."

Governor Liang looked and saw that she was referring to none other than Yang Zhi, the Blue-faced Beast. He was delighted at the suggestion and said to Yang Zhi, "I almost forgot about you. If you can deliver this birthday gift, then I will promote you."

"Benefactor, I dare not disobey your command," Yang Zhi replied. "When do you plan for the convoy to depart? And how do you want it delivered?"

"I plan to load the gifts on 10 wheelbarrows and dispatch 10 soldiers from my garrison to push them. Each wheelbarrow will have a small yellow banner that says, "Birthday Gift for the Premier." And each wheelbarrow will also have another soldier to protect it. The convoy is to depart within three days."

When he heard this, Yang Zhi said, "I am not trying to get out of the assignment, but I cannot deliver the presents. Please send a better man for the job."

“But I’m trying to give you an opportunity. Along with the checklist for the gifts, there is a letter recommending that the premier send you back here with a nomination for an important post. Why do you decline?”

“My lord, I have also heard that last year’s convoy was taken by robbers and they still haven’t been caught. Right now, bandits are running rampant. There is no waterway connecting here and the capital; you would have to travel by land. The route takes you past Purple Gold Mountain, Double Dragon Mountain, Peach Blossom Mountain, Umbrella Mountain, Yellow Earth Ridge, White Sand Valley, Wild Cloud Ford, and Red Pine Forest. All these places are infested with bandits. Even ordinary travelers would not dare to pass through alone. And if the bandits know that we are carrying valuables, how can they stay away? I would be throwing my life away. That’s why I can’t go.”

“Well, we can just send more soldiers to protect the convoy,” Governor Liang said.

“My lord, even if you sent 500 men, it would do no good. Those guys will be the first to run at the sight of bandits.”

“Well then, are you saying we shouldn’t be sending any gifts?”

“If you would consent to one thing, then I would dare to deliver them.”

“Well, I’m entrusting this task to you, so of course I’ll consent to whatever you suggest.”

“In my opinion, don’t use wheelbarrows. Instead, load the gifts onto 10 shoulder poles. Make them look like travelers’ luggage. Have 10 stout soldiers dress up as porters. Then send another person to go with me, and we will dress up in disguise as merchants and sneak these presents into the capital. That’s the only way it’d work.”

“You’re quite right,” Governor Liang said. “I’ll write a recommendation to guarantee that you come back with a nomination for a high position.”

“Thank you for your kindness, my lord!”

And so the governor told Yang Zhi to go prepare the convoy and select the soldiers for the trip. The next day, he summoned Yang Zhi and asked when he would be able to set out, and Yang Zhi said the next morning.

“My wife also has a load of presents for her relatives,” Governor Liang said. “You can take that with you as well. I am concerned that you don’t know the way to the capital, so I am sending my wife’s steward and two captains to accompany you.”

“My lord, I can’t take this assignment,” Yang Zhi suddenly said.

What?! Man, are you serious? What now?

To see why Yang Zhi is backing out again, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Yang Zhi gives a master class in the “stop making me whip you so hard” approach to management. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!