

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 23.

Last time, Governor Liang had tasked Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast with delivering a convoy of birthday gifts to the capital for his father-in-law, the premier Cai Jing. Yang Zhi accepted, on one condition: That they disguise the presents as ordinary luggage and have 10 soldiers posing as porters carry the load on bamboo poles so as not to attract unwanted attention from bandits. The governor agreed, so Yang Zhi prepared to set off. But the day before, when the governor told him that he would be accompanied by the governor's wife's old steward and two captains of the guard, Yang Zhi was all like, "Nope, I'm out again."

"But the presents are all packed up and ready to go," the befuddled governor said. "Why are you backing out again?"

"My lord, I would be responsible for these 10 loads of gifts, so everyone in the convoy must obey my orders. If I tell them to travel early, then they travel early. If I tell them to travel late, then they travel late. When we move, when we stop, where we rest, it must all be MY decision. But now, you're sending the old steward and the captains with me. The old steward serves your wife and is the husband of her old wet nurse. If we have a disagreement on the trip, I am in no position to argue with him. And if that derails the mission, how would I explain?"

"That's easy enough," Governor Liang said. "I'll just tell those three that they must do as you command."

"In that case, I can take on this assignment. If anything should go wrong, I will accept severe punishment."

That promise delighted the governor. "I was right to promote you," he said. "You really know how to handle things."

The governor now summoned the old steward, whose last name was Xie (4), as well as the two captains. He told them in front of Yang Zhi, "Major Yang has accepted the assignment to escort the

convoy of 11 loads of birthday presents to the premier's residence in the capital. He is in charge. You three will accompany him and obey him in all things. Do not argue with him. As for the tasks that my wife has given you, tend to those with the utmost care. Come back as quickly as you can, and do not slip up."

To all this, the old steward and the two captains agreed. And so the trip was on. The next morning, Yang Zhi and his men got up at 5 a.m. All the presents for the premier were packed and laid out in the courtyard. The old steward and the two captains also packed a small load of presents from the governor's wife. So it was 11 loads in all. Eleven stout soldiers, all dressed like porters, put the loads on their shoulder poles. Yang Zhi put on a broad-brimmed hat and a black silk tunic. His feet were shod in hemp sandals tied with laces of cord. From his waist hung a short broadsword, and he carried a long-handled broadsword.

The old steward was also dressed as a merchant, and the two captains were disguised as assistants. They each carried a long broadsword and several rattan whips. Wait, whips? Yes, whips. You'll see. Just wait.

All this done, the governor gave them the checklist of presents. They then ate a full breakfast and took their leave. The porters carried the loads, and Yang Zhi, the old steward, and the two captains walked alongside them. The convoy, 15 men in all, left the city and headed toward the capital.

It was now the middle of the fifth month on the lunar calendar, which is about mid to late June on our calendar. So the sky was nice and clear, but it was also scorching hot. For the first five or six days of the journey, Yang Zhi had the convoy get up at 5 a.m. every morning and travel until midday, when it got really hot, and then they would stop and call it a day.

But after those first five or six days, they started to leave civilization behind and headed into increasingly desolate wilderness. The roads became small mountain paths. And now, Yang Zhi had them

get up at 7 in the morning and travel until 4 or 5 in the afternoon. So instead of traveling during the relatively cool hours of the early morning, they were now traveling through the hottest time of the day. Pity those 11 soldiers turned porters. In addition to the scorching heat beating down on their backs, their shoulder poles were weighed down with heavy loads. Whenever they came across some woods, they would try to go and rest in the shade, but Yang Zhi was being a real hard ass and demanded that everyone keep moving. If anyone so much as stopped, they would at best get off with a scolding, and at worst, they would feel the bite of Yang Zhi's whip, compelling them to keep moving.

As for the two captains, even though they were just carrying a couple light bundles on their backs, even they were huffing and puffing and struggling to keep up. And that earned them an earful from Yang Zhi.

"You two are so dense! All the responsibility falls on me! But instead of helping me beat these guys and keep them moving, you are lagging behind, too! This is no place to kid around!"

The captains replied, "We are not stalling; it really is too hot to keep moving, that's why we fell behind. The previous few days we were traveling in the early morning, when it was cooler. Why are we all the sudden traveling during the hottest parts of the day? Don't you know the difference?"

"Bullcrap!" Yang Zhi barked. "The previous few days, we were traveling through safe areas. But now, we are in dangerous territory. Who would dare to traverse these parts at 5 a.m.? The only option is to travel during the day."

Well, the two captains didn't say anything back, but they were thinking, "Boy, all this guy ever does is cuss people out." While they were grumbling in silence, Yang Zhi turned his attention back to whipping his porters to keep them moving.

As he moved off, the two captains sat down by a willow tree and waited until the old steward caught up. Then they told him, "That Yang Zhi is just a major in the service of our governor. Who the hell does he think he is?!"

“But the governor told us in front of him that we must not argue with him,” the old steward said. “That’s why I haven’t said anything. But these last couple days, I, too, can’t stand him. Just put up with him for now.”

“Our lord said what he said just to appease Yang Zhi,” the captains said. “Steward, you should say something.”

“Let’s just wait and see,” he told them.

Finally, 4 p.m. arrived, and the convoy stopped at an inn for the day. The 11 porters were all drenched in sweat and trying to catch their breath. They all went to the old steward and said, “What bad luck we have to be soldiers and to be put on this assignment, having to shoulder such heavy loads in this scorching weather. And these last couple days Yang Zhi refuses to travel early when it’s cooler, and we feel the sting of his whip for the smallest things. We are just flesh and blood; woe is us. Woe!”

“Don’t raise a stink, ok?” the old steward said. “When we get to the capital, I will reward you myself.”

“See, if Yang Zhi would treat us like you do, we would not be making any noise!” the porters said.

Soon, they turned in for the night. The next morning, before the sun came up, all the porters got up and wanted to get going while it was still cool. But Yang Zhi jumped up and snarled, “Where the hell are you going?! Get your ass back to bed!”

“If we don’t travel while it’s cool, it’ll soon be too hot to travel during the day, and then you’ll beat us again.”

“What the hell do you know?!” Yang Zhi cursed as he reached for his whip again. Seeing this, all the porters had no choice but to go back to bed.

That day, Yang Zhi got them up again around 7 o'clock, had a casual breakfast, and then set out. Once they were on the road, he was riding them hard again. Nobody was allowed to rest anywhere, and the whip was coming down fast and furiously. All 11 porters muttered under their breath, and the two captains complained nonstop as they walked alongside the old steward. Hearing all this grumbling, the old steward was also getting rather annoyed with Yang Zhi.

And in this way, 14 or 15 days passed, and by now everyone in the convoy detested Yang Zhi. It was now the fourth day of the sixth month. That morning, they had their usual casual breakfast and set out. It wasn't even mid-morning yet, and a bright red sun was already sitting in the middle of the sky, beating down on the men, with nary a cloud in sight.

That day, they were traveling along some hilly, remote mountain paths. After covering about six or seven miles, the porters tried to rest under some willow trees, but Yang Zhi's whip came flying through the air as he shouted, "Keep moving! I'll teach you to rest before it's time!"

The porters stole a peek up at the sky, and nope, still not a single cloud in sight. By now, the heat was unbearable. They pressed on until around noon, and it was so hot that even the rocks on the ground were scorching, making it too painful to keep walking.

"It's so hot out here, the heat is going to kill us!" the porters complained.

"Keep moving!" Yang Zhi barked. "We'll worry about it after we pass that ridge up ahead."

As they approached the ridge, they could see that it was covered with countless green trees, sprouting out of yellow, sandy soil. The ridge had the shape of an old dragon, steep and winding, with jagged rocks sticking out of the ground everywhere.

As soon as the convoy reached the top of the ridge, everyone except Yang Zhi laid down their stuff and collapsed under a pine tree.

“What the hell?!” an incredulous Yang Zhi shouted. “What kind of place do you think this is? How can you rest here?! Get up! Get up!”

“Even if you cut us into pieces, we have to stop. We can’t keep going!” the men said.

Oh yeah? Well, let me just reach for ol’ reliable here. Yang Zhi pulled out his whip again and started pelting the men upside their heads. But as soon as he forced one person to his feet, another would collapse back down to the ground, leaving Yang Zhi bewildered.

By now, the two captains and the old steward had caught up to the convoy, and they, too, sat down under a pine tree to catch their breaths. When he saw Yang Zhi whipping the porters, the old steward said, “Major, it really is too hard to travel. Please don’t punish them.”

“Sir, you don’t understand,” Yang Zhi said. “This is a place frequented by bandits. It’s called Yellow Earth Ridge. Even during times of peace, there were bandits robbing people here, much less these days. Who would dare to rest here?!”

But the two captains now got a bit mouthy and said, “We’ve heard that spiel from you before. You just keep saying that to scare us!”

The old steward chimed in as well. “How about you just let them rest for a bit, and we’ll resume after lunch time?”

“You guy really don’t know any better!” Yang Zhi scoffed. “We can’t do that! Even after we get down from this ridge, it’s another two or three miles before we get back to civilization. What kind of place do you think this is, that we can rest here?!”

“Well, I’m going to sit here for a bit. You can go prod the others forward,” the old steward declared.

Now, Yang Zhi brandished his whip and yelled, “Whoever refuses to walk will get 20 lashes from me!”

But that just caused a ruckus among the men. They all shouted, “Major, we’re each carrying loads of more than 100 catties, while you are walking around empty-handed. You don’t see us as people! Even if

the governor himself was escorting the convoy, he would at least let us have a word. You have no feelings at all! All you know how to do is brood and rage!”

Oh boy, now they’ve done it. That was the last thing Yang Zhi wanted to hear.

“Damn bastards! You’re pissing me off! Fine, the whip it is then!”

As Yang Zhi lashed the men in their faces, the old steward finally had had enough.

“Major Yang, stop! Listen to me: When I was serving in the premier’s residence in the capital, I saw countless officers, and they all showed me deference. Pardon me for saying so, but you were just a soldier who committed a capital offense. Our lord took pity on you and raised you up to a major. But that’s just a two-bit rank, not befitting such airs. Even if I were just some old man from a village rather than our lord’s steward, I would still feel the need to say something right now. How can you just beat them relentlessly? What kind of way is that to treat them?”

But Yang Zhi refused to back down. “Sir, you are a city-dweller. You spent most of your life in the governor’s mansion. You don’t know the dangers and hardships of the road.”

“[Scoff] I have been to the Southwest and the Southeast, and I have yet to see anything resembling what you’re describing.”

“But now is not a time of peace.”

“What? How dare you? Someone should cut out your tongue. What do you mean this is not a time of peace?”

Yang Zhi was just about to respond when suddenly, he spotted a figure peeking out from a grove of pine trees across the way.

“See? What did I tell you?! There’s a bandit right there!” he said as he dropped his whip, grabbed his long-handled broadsword, and rushed into the grove of trees, shouting, “You’ve got some gall! How dare you peek at my merchandise?!”

As he rushed into the woods, he came upon a row of seven wheelbarrows sitting among the trees, accompanied by seven men who were stripped to the waist, sitting in the shade. One of the men was holding a broadsword. When they saw Yang Zhi stomp onto the scene, all seven men were startled and leaped to their feet.

“Who the hell are you?!” Yang Zhi barked.

“Who are you?” the men asked back.

“Are you bandits?!”

“What? You’re asking us? We’re small-time merchants. We’ve got no money to give you.”

“What, and you think I have money?”

“Really, who are you?” the men asked him.

“You go first. Where are you from?” Yang Zhi demanded.

“We seven are from Haozhou (2,1) Prefecture. We are taking a shipment of dried dates to the capital. We were passing through here and we had heard many people say that bandits often do their business on Yellow Earth Ridge. But we figured all we have with us are these dates and nothing else of value to attract bandits. So we came up the ridge, but then it got too hot to keep going, so we decided to rest for a bit in these woods and resume when it gets cooler. Just now, we heard someone coming up the ridge. We were worried that it was bandits, so one of us went to check it out.”

“Ah, so that’s it,” Yang Zhi said. “Turns out you’re ordinary merchants. I saw you peeking at my group just now and thought you might be bandits, so I rushed over to take a look.”

With the situation calming down, the seven merchants now offered Yang Zhi a few dates, but he declined and returned to his own convoy.

“Since there are bandits around, we should go,” the old steward said when he saw Yang Zhi.

“No, I thought it was bandits, but it turned out to be a few date merchants.”

“See, if it were really as dangerous as you claim, those guys would all be dead by now,” the old steward said.

“Let’s not argue anymore,” Yang Zhi replied, trying to make peace. “I’m just glad there was no trouble. Alright, you guys take a break, and we’ll get back on the road when it’s cooler.”

Wait, what? This was music to the men’s ears, and they all smiled. Yang Zhi now stood his broadsword up in the ground and he too sat down in the shade of a tree.

A few minutes later, someone else was coming up the ridge. In the distance appeared a man carrying a pair of buckets on a shoulder pole, trudging up the hill. As he walked, he was singing these lines:

Beneath a red sun that burns like fire,
Half-scorched grain in the fields stand.
Peasant hearts are scalded with worries dire,
While the rich themselves idly fan.

As he reached the top of the ridge, this guy, too, set down his buckets and found a spot in the shade to rest.

“Hey, what’s in your buckets?” Yang Zhi’s men asked him.

“Grain alcohol.”

“Where you taking that?”

“To the next village to sell.”

“How much for a bucket?”

“Five strings.”

Yang Zhi's men now talked amongst themselves. "We're hot and thirsty, so why don't we buy a bucket to cool down a bit?"

But while they were gathering up money amongst themselves, they heard Yang Zhi's voice booming over their shoulders.

"What are you guys doing now?!"

"Buying some wine."

And the next thing you know, the back of their heads were being introduced to the handle of Yang Zhi's broadsword.

"You bastards! How dare you buy wine without my permission?!"

What? C'mon man! Seriously?!

"What are you getting all worked up for?" the men protested. "We're spending our own money to buy some wine. What business is it of yours? Why are you beating us again?"

"You bumpkins! What the hell do you know?! All you can think about is wetting your whistle. You have no idea of the dangers on the road. Do you know how many people have been done in by drugged wine?!"

When the wine peddler heard this, he scoffed and said to Yang Zhi, "Man, what's up with that? I wasn't going to sell you any wine in the first place. What kind of rotten thing is that to say?!"

While they were quarreling, the merchants from across the way came over to see what all the hubbub was about. The wine peddler told them, "I was minding my own business, carrying my wine across the ridge to sell in the next village. It was too hot, so I stopped here to rest in the shade. These guys wanted to buy some of my wine. I hadn't even agreed to sell them any yet, and then this guy said my wine is drugged. How ridiculous is that?! What kind of thing is that to say?!"

The merchants said, "Oh, we thought it was bandits. Turns out it's this. Look, it's just words. Hey, we were just thinking about wine. Since they're suspicious and don't want any, then sell us a bucket."

“Nope, nope.” the wine peddler refused.

“Look man. Don’t be so thick-headed. We didn’t say anything about you. Our money is just as good as if you sold this wine in the village. Just sell us some, alright? Think of it as doing a good deed, like handing out tea on a hot day, and you’ll be quenching our thirst at the same time.”

“[Sigh] Look, it’s not a big deal to sell you a bucket,” the wine peddler relented. “I just didn’t like what those guys were saying. Besides, I don’t have anything for you to drink with.”

“Look man, don’t take it so seriously,” the merchants said. “It’s just words, alright? And we have our own ladles.”

As they spoke, two of the merchants went to their wheelbarrows and came back with two ladles made from dried gourds, and another brought back a big pile of dates. The seven merchants stood around one of the buckets of wine and took turns chugging ladles of grain alcohol, chasing it with some dates. Soon, one of the buckets was empty.

“Oh, we forgot to ask how much it was,” the merchants said.

“I never haggle. Five strings for one bucket. Ten strings for both.”

“Sure, we can give you the five strings,” the merchants said. “But let us have one more scoop from the other bucket.”

“Nope! My price is firm,” the peddler insisted.

Alright, fine. So the merchants got out some money to pay him the five strings for the bucket they drank. But while one of the merchants was forking over the coins, another snuck around behind the peddler, took the cover off the other bucket, and scooped out a ladle of wine. But while he was chugging it, the peddler saw him and tried to take the ladle from him. The wine thief ran toward the woods, and the peddler gave chase. While that was happening, another merchant came out from the woods with a ladle and reached into the bucket to get his share. Just then, though, the peddler got back, snatched the ladle from the guy, poured the wine back into the bucket, and closed the lid.

“Man, what the hell?!” the peddler exclaimed as he threw the merchant’s ladle to the ground. “How ungentlemanlike? You’re dressed properly enough. Why don’t you act like it?!”

While all this was going on, Yang Zhi’s men were watching and drooling. Finally, they all ran to the old steward and said, “C’mon grandpa. Speak up for us. Those date merchants have already drunken one of the buckets. Let us have the other bucket to quench our thirst. It may be warm wine, but we don’t care. And there’s nowhere else to find water on this ridge. C’mon grandpa!”

By now, that old steward was also kind of itching for a drink, so he went and said to Yang Zhi, “Those date merchants have already drunken one of the buckets. Why don’t we let our men quench their thirst with the other bucket? There is no water source on this ridge, after all.”

Yang Zhi thought to himself, “Well, I saw that those merchants all drank the wine, and they even drank half a ladle from the other bucket, and they’re all fine. Looks like it’s ok. I HAVE been beating these guys pretty hard today. Alright, just let them have a few sips.”

So he said to the steward, “Well, sir, since you are asking too, then let them buy that wine, and we’ll get back on the road after they’re done drinking.”

As soon as he said that, his men took off and flocked over to the wine peddler and tried to shove money in his hands. But he was having none of it.

“Nope, nope! I’m not selling! This wine is drugged, you know!”

The porters put on big grins and said, “C’mon brother! Don’t be like that.”

“Nope. I’m not selling. Stop bugging me.”

And now, the date merchants chimed in and said to the peddler, “C’mon man. That guy may have gone too far with his words, but you’re taking it way too seriously. Even we caught some gripes from you. It has nothing to do with these guys. Just let them buy it.”

“I don’t need people questioning my integrity,” the peddler scoffed.

But the date merchants now pulled the peddler to one side and let the porters take the other bucket. Yang Zhi's men opened the cover and were about to dive in, but then realized they didn't have anything to drink with. So they went over to the merchants and asked to borrow their ladles. The merchants agreed and also offered them some dates.

"Thank you so much!" the porters said.

"No need. We're all merchants. What's a few dates?"

The porters said thanks, took the two ladles and the dates, and returned to the bucket. First, they scooped out two ladles and offered one to the old steward and one to Yang Zhi. The old steward drank, but Yang Zhi refused. So the two captains then each drank a ladle. Now, the 11 porters swarmed around the bucket and guzzled the rest of the wine.

Watching his men chug without any issues, Yang Zhi looked down at the full ladle that he was still holding. The weather WAS really, really hot, and his throat was pretty parched, what with all the scolding he's been dishing out. Finally, he lifted the ladle and drank about half of it, chasing it with a few dates.

The wine was now gone, and it was time to pay up. The peddler told Yang Zhi's men, "Since those merchants stole a ladle from this bucket, I'll take off half a string." So the men pulled together four-and-a-half strings of coins and gave it to him. The peddler stashed away the money, hooked both empty buckets back onto his shoulder pole, and went back down the ridge in the direction from which he came, singing the same song all the while.

A minute later, the sky started to melt. Or was it the ground? Wait, why is everything getting all bendy and twirly and all psychedelic ... ah crap.

The seven date merchants now stood by the pine trees, pointed at Yang Zhi and his men and said, "Tiiiiimmberrrr."

Sure enough, all 15 men in the convoy, Yang Zhi included, started to stagger, looked at each other for a second, and then plopped to the ground. They didn't pass out, but they were unable to move, which made it all the more aggravating, because it meant they were watching helplessly as the seven merchants pushed their wheelbarrows over, dumped out all the dates, put the 11 loads of gifts onto the wheelbarrows, covered them up, uttered a "Sorry for the trouble," and disappeared off the ridge.

So, yeah, I'm sure you can guess who those seven guys were. But the bigger mystery is how the wine got drugged when the hijackers drank from both barrels and were just fine. To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Yang Zhi finally gets to tell his men "I told you so," for all the good it'll do him. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!