

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 24.

Last time, Yang Zhi was escorting a convoy of birthday presents to the capital when they stopped to rest on Yellow Earth Ridge. They were soon joined by a group of seven date merchants, and then by a wine peddler with two buckets of wine. Yang Zhi refused to let his men buy any of the wine, out of fear that it might be drugged. The date merchants, meanwhile, had no such qualms and emptied one bucket and even stole a sip from the other bucket. Seeing that they were just fine, Yang Zhi relented and allowed his men to drink the other bucket, and he had half a ladle himself.

But soon things became less than fine. Before long, Yang Zhi and his whole convoy found themselves lying on the ground, fully conscious but unable to move, watching helplessly as the seven date merchants absconded with their precious cargo.

So as I'm sure you can guess by now, the seven date merchants were the seven heroes who had plotted to hijack this convoy an episode earlier: Chao Gai, the ringleader; Wu Yong, the brains of the operation; Gongsun Sheng, the Daoist priest; Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil; and the three Ruan brothers. And the wine peddler? That was Bai Sheng, the Daylight Rat, an idler from the nearby village that Chao Gai knew.

So we know who they were. But how DID they do it? If this were a movie, this is where we would rewind the action and show you how the deed was done. So ...

When Bai Sheng came up the ridge with the wine, both buckets were clean. So of course nothing happened when Chao Gai and company drank one bucket. But they knew they had to show Yang Zhi that the other bucket was fine, too, in order to trick him. That was done when one of the guys, Liu Tang, stole a ladle from the second bucket and drank it while Bai Sheng chased him into the woods, in full view of everyone in Yang Zhi's convoy.

So how did the drug get into the second bucket? Remember that when Liu Tang drank from it, he was fine, so at that point the wine was still undrugged. But, remember that while Bai Sheng was chasing

Liu Tang into the woods, somebody else came and scooped out a ladle from the second bucket. That was Wu Yong, the mastermind who devised the actual plan. But he never actually drank from that ladle. Before he could do that, Bai Sheng had come back and taken the ladle from him and poured that wine back into the bucket.

What Yang Zhi and company did not realize was that when Wu Yong dipped his ladle into the second bucket, the drug was in the ladle, so when Bai Sheng poured the wine from the ladle back into the bucket, all that drug went with it.

A good long while after Chao Gai and his friends had disappeared, Yang Zhi was starting to regain movement in his limbs. He had not ingested as much of the wine as everyone else, so he recovered much sooner. He now struggled to his feet and staggered over to his men. All 14 of them were still lying on the ground, unable to move, with drool coming out of the corner of their open mouths.

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?!” Yang Zhi fumed. “Fine, drink your damn piss water! And now the birthday gifts are gone!! What am I supposed to tell Governor Liang?! What am I supposed to do with this checklist now?!”

As he raged, he tore the checklist of presents to smithereens.

“I have nowhere to go now! I might as well die on this ridge.”

And so Yang Zhi staggered toward the edge of a cliff, preparing to leap to his death. But as he leaned over the edge, a thought struck him and made him stop at the very last second.

“My parents gave me this stout body, and I have worked hard since my youth to become the skilled warrior that I am. I can’t throw it all away just like this! Instead of dying here today, I might as well wait till they catch me later and worry about it then.”

So he turned around and stared at the 14 other men in the convoy. They were all still motionless, staring back at him helplessly. He pointed at them and cursed, "This happened because you won't listen to me! And now you have ruined me!"

And with that, he grabbed his long and short broadswords, took one look around, saw no reason to linger, let out a long sigh, and stomped off the ridge.

So first of all, I don't think we should let Yang Zhi be in charge of delivering anything ever again. It obviously is not his strong suit, given that he has now twice failed to complete a delivery. And second, I'm never sure quite how to feel for this guy. I mean, he probably earned this fate. First, he pulled the whole prima donna power play to force the governor to make sure everyone knew he was in charge. And then, he was a total jerk to his men the whole way, whipping them and insulting them relentlessly. In other words, he was the hard-ass coach that all the players loathed. It's one thing if he delivered results, but he didn't, and we'll soon see that his treatment of the men will have dire consequences for him.

But on the other hand, let's say he was all chummy with the men. What would he have done differently in this situation? He didn't want them to buy the wine in the first place. His mistake was that he went soft when he should have just answered his men's pleas for wine with a few more swings of his whip. So I don't know. I guess maybe if he had the respect of his men, they would've shut up after he told them no the first time. But whatever. The deed is done. The booty is lost. And now, Yang Zhi was gone as well.

A long while later, around 10 p.m., the other members of the convoy finally recovered. As soon as they could move their mouths again, the laments poured out nonstop.

"See, you guys didn't listen to Major Yang, and now I'm ruined, too," the old steward said.

“Grandpa,” the other men said, “what’s done is done. Let’s figure out what to do next.”

“What do you all think?” the steward asked.

“The fault lies with us. But as the old saying goes, ‘When the fire licks your clothes, you beat it out. When there’s a hornet in your tunic, open it quick.’ If Yang Zhi was still here, then there would be nothing we can say. But he has gone off to who knows where. So why don’t we go back to the governor and blame it all on Yang Zhi. We can say he kept beating and humiliating us the whole way and pushed us until we were exhausted. And then he ganged up with bandits, drugged us, and stole the gifts.”

“That’s not bad,” the old steward said. “When morning comes, we will go report this to the authorities. We will leave the two captains here to help hunt down the perps. In the meantime, the rest of us will rush back to Daming Prefecture to tell the governor and have him notify the premier. Then they can order the authorities here in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture to apprehend the bandits.”

And so it was decided. When morning came, the group went to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture and told the magistrate their story.

We will get back to the fallout from that later. But for now, let’s find out where Yang Zhi went off to. After he left Yellow Earth Ridge, he just wandered aimlessly toward the south for half a day and then half a night before taking a break in some woods. While he rested, he thought to himself, “I have no money, and I have no friend or family around here to turn to. What should I do?”

When the sky started to lighten up, he got back on the road again while it was still cool. After walking for seven or eight miles, he came across a tavern. “I’m going to die if I don’t get some wine first,” he thought to himself, so he stepped inside and sat down at a table. A woman standing near the stove asked him what he wanted.

“Bring me two horns of wine first, and let me have some rice and meat. I’ll pay you later.”

So the woman summoned a young man and told him to serve wine while she prepared the food. Soon, everything was ready, and Yang Zhi devoured it. His thirst quenched and his belly full, he now grabbed his broadsword and got up to go.

Uhhh, dude, you forgot something.

“You haven’t paid yet,” the woman shouted as he was walking out.

“I’ll pay you on my way back. Put it on my tab for now.”

Ha, nice try. The young man who was serving wine now rushed out and grabbed Yang Zhi from behind. But Yang Zhi turned around and knocked him down with one punch, prompting the woman to start yelling. Yang Zhi turned back and kept walking, but before long, he heard someone else shouting behind him, demanding that he stop.

He turned and saw a man stripped to the waist, charging this way with staff in hand.

“I am SO not in the mood for this!” Yang Zhi said as he stopped and waited. Behind the oncoming attacker, the young man he had knocked down earlier was also coming with a pitchfork in hand, followed by a few workmen, each wielding a staff.

“If I kill the first guy, the rest of them will not dare to give chase,” Yang Zhi thought. Great, so yeah, we are quickly escalating from dine and dash to homicide here. He gripped his long broadsword and traded blows with the lead attacker. They fought for 20-some bouts, and Yang Zhi had his opponent on the defensive. Just as the other men were about to get in on the action, this guy leaped out of Yang Zhi’s weapon’s range and shouted, “Everyone stop! You there, with the broadsword: What’s your name?”

“I don’t mind telling you. My name is Yang Zhi, the Blue-faced Beast.”

“Are you Yang Zhi the major from the capital?”

“How do you know that?”

The man now tossed aside his staff, bowed to Yang Zhi, and said, “I was so blind!”

Yang Zhi helped him up and asked who he was.

“I grew up in the capital,” the man said. “I trained under Lin Chong, a drill instructor in the imperial guards. My name is Cao (2) Zheng (4). My forefathers were butchers, so I am quite skilled at butchering animals, and everyone calls me the Knife-Wielding Demon. A local rich man gave me 5,000 strings of cash to come here to Shandong Province and open a business. But it went bust and I lost my capital and could not go home. So I stayed and married into a farmer’s family. The woman by the stove is my wife, and this young man with the pitchfork is my brother-in-law. When we were fighting just now, I saw that your skills were the equal of my master Lin Chong, and I was not a match for you.”

“Ah, so you are Lin Chong’s disciple. Your master was framed by Marshal Gao and has become an outlaw at Liangshan.”

“That what I’ve heard, too. I just didn’t know if it was true. Major, please come in and rest.”

So Yang Zhi and Cao Zheng went back inside the tavern. Cao Zheng asked Yang Zhi to take the seat of honor and then told his wife and brother-in-law to come pay their respects. They then treated him to more food and wine. As they were drinking, Cao Zheng asked Yang Zhi how he came to be there, and Yang Zhi relayed his whole story arc, up through yesterday’s debacle.

“With that being the case,” Cao Zheng said, “why don’t you stay here for a while and then figure out what to do?”

“I am grateful for your kindness. But I worry the authorities will come after me, so I can’t stay long.”

“Where will you go?”

“I was thinking I would go to Liangshan and look for your master Lin Chong. When I passed through there last time, he and I ran into each other and had a good duel. Wang Lun saw that our skills were evenly matched, so he invited me to their stronghold. That’s how I became acquainted with your master. Wang Lun tried time and again to keep me, but I refused. But now, I would be going back to him as a tattooed criminal. That’s so embarrassing. That’s why I can’t make up my mind about what to do.”

“You’re right,” Cao Zheng said. “I have also heard people say that Wang Lun is narrow-minded and jealous and cannot tolerate people. I’ve heard that when my master Lin Chong joined them, he had to put up with all sorts of crap. Hey, how about this? Not far from here, within the borders of Qingzhou (1,1) Prefecture, is Double Dragon Mountain. There’s a monastery on the mountain called Sacred Pearl Monastery. That’s quite a mountain. There’s only one road leading up to the monastery. Right now, the leader of the monastery has forsaken his vows and grown back his hair, and the other monks have followed suit. They’ve gathered about 500 men and are looting and pillaging. Their leader is called Deng (4) Long (2) the Golden-eyed Tiger. Major, if you want to become an outlaw, you could go join up there and find a refuge.”

“Since such a place exists, I should go take it over,” Yang Zhi said.

Uhh, well, I think Cao Zheng meant joining them, not, you know, kicking them out. But ok, sure. That works, too, I guess. In any case, Yang Zhi spent the night at Cao Zheng’s home, then borrowed some travel money, took his leave, and set out for Double Dragon Mountain the next day. After a day’s travel, he was approaching the mountain as night began to descend. So he decided to go rest in the woods for the night and go up the mountain the next day.

As he turned into some woods, however, he was in for a shock. Right smack dab in front of him was a fat monk, stripped to the waist, exposing his tattoo-covered back, sitting in the shade of a pine tree. When the monk saw Yang Zhi, he quickly grabbed his Buddhist staff, leaped to his feet, and roared, “You bastard! Where did you come from?!”

From the accent, Yang Zhi could tell the monk was from west of the pass, just like himself. So he asked the monk where he was from. But the monk gave no answer and instead raised the staff and charged.

“Well this baldy is quite rude!” Yang Zhi said to himself. “Fine, I’ll take out some frustration on him!”

So he raised his broadsword, and the two men tangled like a pair of tigers or dragons, trading blows for about 50 bouts without a winner. Just then, the monk feigned a thrust, leaped backward and shouted, "Halt!"

Both men stopped, and Yang Zhi was secretly impressed, thinking, "Where did this monk come from? He's got some skills. I was just barely able to hold my own against him."

"Hey you, blue-faced guy," the monk shouted. "Who are you?"

"I am Major Yang Zhi from the capital."

"Wait, are you the one who killed that thug Niu (2) Er (4)?"

"Do you not see the tattoo on my face?" Yang Zhi said.

The monk laughed and said, "What a treat to meet you here!"

"Brother, who might you be? How did you know about that business with me trying to sell my broadsword?" Yang Zhi asked.

Well, I think we can all guess who the monk was.

"I am none other than Lu Zhishen," he said. "I used to be a major under the old General Zhong. I killed Butcher Zheng with three punches and fled to Wutai Mountain to become a monk. Because of the flower tattoos on my back, people call me Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk."

"Ah, turns out we're from the same place," Yang Zhi laughed. "I have long heard of your great name on the jianghu scene. I heard that you were at the Great Xiangguo Monastery. How did you end up here?"

"It's a long story. I was tending the vegetable garden at the Xiangguo Monastery. I met Lin Chong the Panther Head. He was framed by Marshal Gao, who tried to have him killed. I prevented that injustice and saw him all the way to Cangzhou Prefecture. But then the two guards escorting him went back to the capital and told Gao Qiu that I had intervened and saved Lin Chong, and that's why they couldn't kill him. That bastard Gao Qiu! God I hate him! He instructed the abbot to dismiss me, and



then he sent men to arrest me. Thankfully, a group of riffraffs sent me word. Otherwise I would've fallen into his hands. So I burned that vegetable garden to the ground and went on the lam, drifting to and fro. When I was traveling through Mengzhou (4,1) Prefecture, I stopped at a tavern at Crossroads Slope and almost lost my life. A woman in that tavern drugged me. Thankfully, her husband came back early and saw me and my weapons and figured I was no ordinary man. So they brought me around and asked my name. I ended up staying with them for a few days and became their sworn brother. That husband and wife are also known on the jianghu scene. He is named Zhang (1) Qing (1) the Gardener, while she is called Sun (1) Erniang (4,2), the Female Yaksha. They're honorable people. After four or five days there, I heard about this Double Dragon Mountain as a possible refuge, so I came to join up with that Deng (4) Long (2). But that bastard refused to let me join, so we fought. He was no match for me, so he locked the gates of the three passes that block the road up the mountain. There's no other way up, and no matter how much I curse them, they won't come down to fight me. I was so pissed off, and I was stuck here when you showed up just now."

Whew! Lu Zhishen was right. That was a helluva long story. And by the way, a quick word about the woman running the tavern that he referred to, Sun Erniang. He mentioned that her nickname was the Female Yaksha. Yakshas are nature spirits found in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain mythology. They are associated with things like water, trees, wilderness, and such. They are generally benevolent, but can be mischievous at times. And I would categorize running a "black tavern" where you drug the customers as definitely a little more than mischievous.

We'll hear more about this Female Yaksha later on in the novel. But for now, back to Lu Zhishen and Yang Zhi. They spent the night chit-chatting in the forest, and Yang Zhi recounted how he killed the street thug and how he ended up losing the birthday gift convoy. He also mentioned that Cao Zheng had pointed him here as a refuge as well.

“Since they have barred the gates, let’s not stay here,” Yang Zhi said. “When will they ever come down? Let’s go back to Cao Zheng’s home and talk it over.”

So they rushed back to Cao Zheng’s tavern. Yang Zhi made the introductions, and then they got down to talking about how they could take over Double Dragon Mountain.

“If the mountain passes are closed off, then even 10,000 troops would not be able to go up there, much less just the two of you,” Cao Zheng said. “We must use cunning instead of brawn.”

“That damn bastard!” Lu Zhishen cursed. “When I first went to join him, he met me outside the pass. But when he refused to take me in, we ended up fighting out there. I kicked him in the groin and sent him to the ground, and almost killed him. But he had the numbers and they saved his butt and then shut the gates of the passes behind them. No matter how much I cursed them, they refused to come out and fight.”

“It’s such a good place,” Yang Zhi said. “We must try to take it.”

“But we can’t get up there!” Lu Zhishen lamented, circling back to the original problem. As the screen faded to black, the three men remained seated around the table, groping for an idea.

The next day, shortly after lunch time, the bandit lackeys manning the first pass at Double Dragon Mountain spotted a group of peasants approaching. They had with them a fat monk who was all tied up. Word of this quickly made its way up the mountain, and then two mid-level bandit managers came down to the pass and asked the peasants what they were doing there.

“We are from a nearby village,” one of the peasants replied. “We run a tavern. This fat monk often comes to our place to drink, and he always gets drunk and refuses to pay. And he said he was going to Liangshan to get 1,000 men so that he could conquer Double Dragon Mountain and cleanse the nearby villages. So we got him nice and drunk and then tied him up so we could offer him to your leader to show our village’s respect, so that we won’t have any trouble with you guys in the future.”

The mid-level bandit managers were delighted to hear this. They rushed up the mountain to inform their leader, Deng (4) Long (2). When he heard that the monk with a fondness for kicking people in the groin had been captured, he rejoiced.

“Bring him up. I’m going to use his heart to chase my wine and soothe my anger.”

Soon, the gates to the passes opened, and the peasants and their prisoner were brought up. As they walked, the peasants saw how impenetrable the terrain was. The three passes were surrounded by steep cliffs, with just one road going up. Each pass has logs and boulders stacked up for defense, not to mention tons of crossbows and weapons. As they made their way through the passes and approached the Sacred Pearl Monastery, they saw that it sat on a smooth, flat plain and was surrounded by wooden walls.

In front of the monastery stood seven or eight bandit lackeys. When they saw the monk being brought up, they pointed and cursed at him. “You bald donkey. You injured our king. But now you’re ours! We’re going to take our time carving you up.”

The monk remained silent. The group continued on and entered the assembly hall in the monastery. This hall used to hold the statue of the Buddha, but that has been discarded and replaced with a command chair, which was flanked by many bandit lackeys, all armed with spears and staffs.

Momentarily, the bandit leader Deng Long entered with the assistance of two lackeys and sat down in the command chair.

“You bald donkey!” he cursed at the monk. “You kicked me in the crotch the day before. It’s still swollen. But now, you’re going to get your comeuppance.”

Just then, Lu Zhishen’s eyes grew wide and he roared, “Bastard, stay where you are!”

In that moment, the two peasants behind Lu Zhishen gave his restraints a tug, and the rope fell to the ground. Lu Zhishen grabbed his staff from another peasant and leaped toward Deng Long.

Meanwhile, another of the peasants flipped back his broad-brimmed hat and raised his long-handled

broadsword. This, as you might guess, was Yang Zhi. And the rest of the peasants were Cao Zheng and some of his men, all of whom now pulled out their weapons and attacked.

Before Deng Long could even get out of his seat, Lu Zhishen's staff landed on his head, splitting it in two and smashing the command chair in the process. As for the bandit lackeys, Yang Zhi had already cut down four or five of them. Cao Zheng shouted, "Surrender now! Whoever resists will die!"

All the bandits present, all 600 of them, were stunned and immediately surrendered. Well, that was easy. Lu Zhishen and company had Deng Long's body removed and burned. Next, they inspected the stores and the buildings to take stock of the prize they had just claimed. Then, they sat down for a celebratory feast. Lu Zhishen and Yang Zhi became the leaders of the gang, and all the bandits pledged their allegiance, so they just kept most of the old management structure. Cao Zheng then took his leave and returned to his tavern.

So that wraps up Yang Zhi's story arc for now, though we will definitely see him and Lu Zhishen again. But what about the people he left behind on Yellow Earth Ridge, the ones who were going to blame the whole thing on him? Will the governor believe their story? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, the perfect crime turns out to be just a bit imperfect. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!