

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 25.

Last time, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast was looking for a place to go after losing the birthday gift convoy. He hooked up with Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, and together they took over a bandit stronghold on Double Dragon Mountain as their own.

Turns out it's a good thing that Yang Zhi found this refuge, because he was about to become a wanted man. The 14 men from his convoy that he had left back on Yellow Earth Ridge after the gifts were stolen had decided that they would pin the whole thing on him. Once they recovered from the drug, they traveled day and night back to Daming Prefecture and threw themselves in front of Governor Liang, who was still in the dark about what had happened.

"You guys must be tired from the journey," he said. "I'm much obliged to you. Hey, where's Major Yang?"

"Don't ask," the men replied. "That ungrateful crook! A few days after we hit the road, we were passing through Yellow Earth Ridge and it was really hot, so we rested in the woods. But who knew that Yang Zhi would conspire with seven bandits. The bandits were disguised like date merchants and waiting for us on the ridge. They also had another man pretend to be a wine peddler and bring some wine up the ridge. We drank some of that wine and got drugged. Then they tied us up and stole all the gifts. We have notified the authorities in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture and left the two captains there to await orders to apprehend the bandits, while we rushed back here to inform you."

Governor Liang flew into a rage. "That damn criminal! I tried so hard to lift him up, and he turns out to be such an ingrate! If I catch him, I'll cut him to pieces!"

Governor Liang immediately dispatched a letter to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture, the area where the heist took place. He also sent a letter to his father-in-law, the premier Cai Jing, telling him that, hey, I got you the greatest birthday present ever, but guess what? It got stolen on the way to you. Yeah I know I said that last year, too, but it's true.

When the premier Cai Jing received the letter, he was shocked and pissed.

“These bandits have gotten so bold!” he said. “Last year my son-in-law’s gift to me got hijacked and still hasn’t been recovered. And now they’ve done it again! This shall not stand!”

So Cai Jing immediately sent an official order to Jizhou Prefecture, telling the prefect there that he must apprehend the perpetrators immediately. That poor prefect was already on pins and needles after receiving the letter from Governor Liang, and then his doorman told him that oh hey, the premier sent someone to see you.

“This must be about the birthday gifts!” the prefect said with alarm. So he hurried outside to welcome the officer and said, “On this matter, I have already received Governor Liang’s orders and dispatched investigators and cops, but they haven’t found any trace of the perpetrators yet. And then the day before, the governor sent someone to follow up on the matter, and I once again sent men out to investigate carefully, but still haven’t found anything yet. If I have any news, I will personally go report to the governor.”

But the officer wasn’t going to be satisfied with that. He told the prefect, “I am a confidant of the premier’s. He has ordered me to come and arrest this group of bandits. When I was leaving, the premier instructed me that when I get here, I am to take up residence right here in the administrative compound and wait for you to arrest the seven date merchants, the wine peddler, and that fugitive Yang Zhi. He is giving us 10 days to arrest them and take them to the capital. If we don’t make that deadline, you, sir, will probably end up taking a little trip to Shamen (1,2) Island, and even I would find it hard to go home and my own life would be in danger. If you don’t believe me, then take a look at this decree from the premier.”

So when this officer said that the prefect might be taking a little trip to Shamen Island if he didn’t make the deadline, what he meant was that the prefect would likely be sent into exile. Shamen Island,

now known as Temple Island, was a place for prisoners and disgraced officials during the Song Dynasty. So this was one island getaway the prefect wanted no part of.

The prefect was feeling the heat, so he immediately summoned the investigator in charge of the case. This inspector's name was He (2) Tao (1).

"Are you in charge of the case of the robbery of the birthday gifts on Yellow Earth Ridge?" the prefect asked He Tao.

"My lord," He Tao answered, "Ever since I was assigned to that case, I have not slept. I have sent my top men to Yellow Earth Ridge to hunt down the bandits. But even though I have repeatedly caned them for failing to produce results, they still haven't found any trace of the robbers. I really am trying, but to no avail."

"Bullcrap!" the prefect scoffed. "If the superiors don't press, then the underlings loaf. Do you know how hard I had to work to get to this position? And now, the premier has sent an officer from the capital with an order: We must apprehend all the perpetrators and take them to the capital within 10 days. If we miss the deadline, not only will I lose my job, but I'd likely be sent to Shamen Island. As the inspector, this is on you. You haven't been paying enough attention to this case, and now it's threatening to take me down. Fine, I'll have you tattooed first as a pending criminal to be exiled as far away as possible!"

So the prefect ordered his men to put a tattoo on He Tao's face that said, "Exiled to," with the location left blank. He then told He Tao, "If you don't arrest those bandits, there will be no mercy!"

So poor He Tao had no choice but to go yell at his own men again. A big group of them gathered in a private room to discuss, but none of them had any answers when He Tao asked them about the case. They were all silent like ducks with an arrow through their beaks or fish that have been hooked through the gills.

“When I don’t need you guys, you are always here asking me for money,” He Tao scolded them. “But now that I need you, none of you have said a word. C’mon, take pity on me. Look at the tattoo on my face!”

“Boss, we aren’t unfeeling; we understand,” the men said. “But that group of imposter merchants must be some hardened bandits from another province. They are probably living the high life in their stronghold right now, so how can we get to them? Even if we know who did it, all we can do is look but not touch.”

That was not the answer He Tao was hoping for. He was filled with troubled thoughts as he rode back home. After hitching his horse behind the house, he sat alone, brooding. When his wife asked what was wrong, he told her about the case and how the prefect has already tattooed him and was ready to fill in the blank for his exile destination if he didn’t arrest the bandits before the deadline. And soon, his wife was also filled with troubled and panicked thoughts.

Just then, He Tao’s younger brother, He Qing (1), dropped by. Now, this He Qing was not much of an upstanding character and indulged in various vices like gambling, which had earned him plenty of disdain from his own brother. And He Tao was so not in the mood for his crap at that moment.

“What the hell do you want?” He Tao snapped at his brother. “What are you doing here instead of gambling?”

He Tao’s wife, though, was more diplomatic and greeted her brother-in-law and took him into the kitchen to talk. Once they sat down in the kitchen, she prepared some wine and food for him. After a few cups of wine, He Qing grumbled to her, “My brother really goes too far! Ok, even if I AM no good, I am still your brother! And what is he? Just an inspector. Would it kill him to have me over for a cup of wine?”

“Brother-in-law, you don’t understand,” He Tao’s wife said. “Your brother is in big trouble.”

“He’s always getting money and gifts. What happened to those? He has plenty of money, so what trouble can he have?”

“You haven’t heard. A few days ago a group of date merchants hijacked the birthday gifts intended for Premier Cai Jing at Yellow Earth Ridge. And now, the prefect of Jizhou (4,1) has received an order from the premier to catch all the robbers in 10 days. If your brother can’t make that deadline, he will no doubt get exiled to some remote, treacherous place. Did you not see that he already has the words “Exiled to” tattooed on his face? They just haven’t filled in the blank yet. If he can’t catch the bandits, he’s going to suffer. So of course he’s not in the mood to drink with you. That’s why I laid out some food and wine for you. He’s been brooding all day. You can’t blame him.”

Hearing this, He Qing said, “I, too, have heard people say in passing that the birthday gift convoy got hijacked. Where did it happen again?”

“I just heard that it was on Yellow Earth Ridge,” He Tao’s wife replied.

“And who took it?”

“Brother-in-law, you’re not drunk, and I just told you, it was 7 date merchants.”

At that, He Qing started laughing out loud and said, “Oh, so that’s it. Since he knows they’re date merchants, then why is he brooding? Why doesn’t he just send some smart men to go arrest them?”

“That’s easy for you to say. Where would one go to arrest them?”

“Sister-in-law, why do you need to worry about it? What about that gang of fairweather friends that my brother always keeps around while he ignores me, his own blood brother? And now that he’s in need, where are they? If he’d tell me about this, then I’d get a chance to make a few bucks. It’s not so hard to catch that group of second-rate crooks.”

“Brother-in-law, stop your nonsense.”

“Alright then, I guess I’ll just wait until my brother is in real dire straits before I come save him,” He Qing said as he got up to go, but He Tao’s wife kept him and offered him two more cups of wine. She

could tell that He Qing was holding something back, so she quickly told her husband, and He Tao now called for his brother.

Forcing a smile on his face, He Tao asked his brother, in the nicest tone possible, "Brother, since you know where those robbers went, why don't you save me?"

"Oh I don't know nothing. I was just kidding with sister-in-law. How can I save you?"

"Good brother, don't be offended by my manners. Focus on how good I usually am to you, not how bad I am on occasion. Please, save my life!"

"[Scoff] Good brother, you have two or three hundred good officers under your command. Why doesn't any of them do anything to help you? What can little ol' me do for you?"

"Oh brother. Don't even mention those guys. You're getting at something, I can tell. Don't let someone else steal the credit. Give me a lead, and I'll repay you. Just let me exhale."

"What leads? I don't have any."

"Don't torture me. We were both born from the same womb!"

"Don't worry. Just wait until things are really dire, and then I'll come help you nab this group of petty thieves."

He Tao's wife now chimed in. "Brother-in-law, you have to help him, no matter what. It's your duty as a brother. The premier has issued an order for the arrest of that gang. It's a huge deal, and yet you're calling them petty thieves."

"Oh sister-in-law, you know I only come here to ask for gambling money. Many's the time that my brother has berated me. But no matter how much crap I get from him, I never argue with him. And when he feasts, it's always with other people. But NOW apparently I am of some use."

Well, now He Tao was certain that his brother knew something, so he quickly got out a 10-tael piece of silver and put it on the table.

“Brother, take this down payment for now. When we capture the bandits, I’ll see to it that you get the bounty.”

He Qing laughed and said, “Brother, this is called ‘Hugging the idol’s foot when you’re in a bind but neglecting him in ordinary times.’ If I take this silver now, I would be extorting you. Take it away; don’t try to bribe me. If you do that, then I won’t tell you anything. If you two would apologize to me, then I’ll tell you. I don’t care about your money.”

“My silver all comes from rewards for cases I’ve solved,” He Tao said. “I always have a few hundred strings of coins on hand. Don’t refuse me. Just tell me: Who are these bandits? Where are they?”

Slapping his thigh, He Qing said, “I’ve got them right here in my pocket!”

“In your pocket?! What do you mean?”

“Never you mind, brother. Just take my word for it. Put away your silver; don’t try to bribe me with it. Just treat me halfway decent, and I’ll tell you.”

“Look, this silver is part of the bounty for the case. It’s not a bribe. And there will be a lot more where that came from. Now brother, tell me how you have that gang of robbers in your pocket.”

Having sufficiently tormented his brother, He Qing now reached into the document bag he was carrying and pulled out a notebook.

“That gang is all in here,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“To tell you the truth, a while back I lost every last coin I had at the gambling house. A gambling buddy of mine brought me to the Wang Family Inn at Anle (1,4) Village five miles to the north of here, where I did some odd jobs to pull together some money. The authorities have decreed that all the inns in the area must set up a guest registry with the proper government seals. Every guest must be recorded with their point of origin, their destination, their name, and their business. And the registry must be

shown to the local ward chief once a month. Because the clerk at the inn is illiterate, they paid me to help them make entries in the registry for the past few weeks.

“On the third day of the sixth month, seven date merchants with seven wheelbarrows stayed at the inn. I recognized their leader. He was Chao Gai, the ward chief from East Bank Village in Yuncheng (4,2) County. You know how I recognize him? I once went and stayed at his estate with a gambling buddy; that’s how. So anyway, when I was making the entry in the registry, I asked them for their names. Before Chao Gai could speak, a fair-faced man with a mustache and goatee cut him off and said, ‘Our last name is Li (3). We’re taking dates from Haozhou (2,1) Prefecture to sell in the capital.’ I wrote that down, but I was kind of suspicious.

“The next day, that group left. Then the innkeeper took me into the village to gamble. When we were at a fork in the road, we saw a man passing by while carrying two buckets. I didn’t know him, but the innkeeper shouted to him, ‘Hey Mr. Bai (2), where are you going?’ And that guy said, ‘I’m taking this load of vinegar to sell to a rich man in the village.’ The innkeeper then told me, ‘That guy’s name is Bai (2) Sheng (4), the Daylight Rat. He’s a gambler, too.’ I made a note of it. Later on, I started hearing chatter that a group of date merchants hijacked a convoy of birthday presents on Yellow Earth Ridge after drugging the escorts. Who else could that be if not Chao Gai?! You just need to arrest that Bai Sheng and interrogate him, and you will find out everything. This notebook is my copy of the registry.”

He Tao was ecstatic. He immediately brought his brother to see the prefect. Once the prefect heard this story, he dispatched eight officers to accompany He Tao and his brother, and they set out at once for Anle (1,4) Village. They arrived that night and made the innkeeper take them to Bai Sheng’s house.

It was midnight when they pounded on Bai Sheng’s door. The door opened, and it was Bai Sheng’s wife. Behind her, they could see Bai Sheng lying on his bed, moaning. When they questioned his wife, she told them that he was feverish but had not been able to break a sweat.



Yeeeah, ok. Nobody was buying that. The officers barged in and dragged Bai Sheng out of bed. When they saw that his cheeks were a healthy pink, they immediately tied him up.

“Nice thing you did back on Yellow Earth Ridge!” He Tao shouted at him.

But Bai Sheng was not talking. The officers then tied up his wife, but she wasn’t talking either. So the officers started searching the house. They tore the place up, but found nothing. But then, they peeked under the bed. There was nothing under there, but the dirt floor in that spot was looking suspiciously uneven. So they moved the bed and started digging. Just a couple feet down, they hit paydirt. The officers shouted in excitement, and Bai Sheng’s face turned pale as they unearthed a bundle of riches.

With evidence in hand, the officers now put a bag over Bai Sheng’s face and took him, his wife, and the loot back to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. They arrived right around dawn and immediately dragged Bai Sheng into the prefect’s hall, bound him even more tightly, and began questioning him. Bai Sheng, for his part, refused to give up any names.

Well, when you don’t talk, that could only mean one thing in the Chinese legal system: Bring on the torture. A few rounds of canings later, Bai Sheng’s skin was split and blood was pouring from his wounds.

“We already know the chief culprit is Chao Gai, ward chief from East Bank Village,” the prefect shouted. “There is no point in denying! Tell me who the other six people are, and I’ll spare you another beating.”

Bai Sheng, though, still refused to talk, which earned him another round of caning. Finally, he broke.

“The ringleader was Chao Gai,” he confessed. “He and six other men came to recruit me to carry the wine for them. But I don’t know who the other six were.”

“Well, that’s not a problem,” the prefect said. “We just need to catch Chao Gai, and we’ll know who the other six are.”

So the prefect ordered that Bai Sheng be placed in a cangue that weighed 20 catties, or about 26 pounds, and thrown in jail. His wife, too, was put in chains and sent to the women's prison. Next, the prefect issued an order instructing He Tao to take 20 of his best men and go to Yuncheng (4,2) County. Once there, they are to ask the county magistrate to help them apprehend Chao Gai and the other six robbers. They also took along the two captains who had been part of the convoy, so that they could identify whether these were indeed the men who drugged them. Everything, of course, had to be done in secret so as not to arouse any suspicion.

He Tao and his entourage set out right away. When they arrived at Yungcheng County, they first discreetly set up at an inn. He Tao then took just a couple men with him to go see the magistrate and deliver the prefect's order.

It was late morning when they arrived at the courthouse. The magistrate had already concluded the morning session, and everything was quiet in front of the courthouse. So He Tao and his men sat down at a teahouse across the way, ordered a cup of tea, and waited for court to resume.

"Why is it so quiet around here today?" He Tao asked the waiter.

"The magistrate ended the morning session early today. All the attendants and litigants are off at lunch."

"And who is the magisterial clerk on duty today?"

"Here he comes," the waiter said as he pointed.

He Tao looked up and saw a man coming out of the courthouse. He was in his 30s and had eyes like those of a phoenix, eyebrows like silkworms, droopy ears, bright eyes, square lips, a mustache, and a short stature.

"Sir, please come join me for tea," He Tao called out to this clerk.

Seeing that he was dressed like a policeman, the clerk quickly greeted him and asked where he was from. He Tao invited him into the teahouse. They sat down, and He Tao sent his two companions outside to stand watch.

“What’s your name, sir?” the clerk asked.

“I am He Tao, a lowly police inspector from Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. May I ask your honorable name, sir?”

“Oh, my apologies for not recognizing you,” the clerk answered. “My name is Song Jiang.”

When he heard this, He Tao quickly fell to his knees and kowtowed, saying, “I have long heard of your great name, but haven’t had the fortune to meet you until now!”

Wait, why all this fuss over a lowly clerk of the court? Well, we’ll get to that. For now, though, the clerk, Song Jiang, asked He Tao to get up and take the seat of honor, which kicked off a round of “Oh I would not dare,” followed by, “Ah but you must.” Eventually, Song Jiang ended up sitting in the position of host, while He Tao took the position of guest. Song Jiang then ordered two cups of tea, which arrived momentarily. After they drank the tea, Song Jiang asked He Tao what brought him to Yuncheng County.

“To tell you the truth, I have come here for a few important people,” He Tao said.

“Does this have something to do with a case?”

“Here’s a sealed order. I must trouble you to help me carry it out.”

“Since you have been sent from above to arrest some criminals, I would not dare to do otherwise. What is the case?”

“Sir, since you are the keeper of the official court records, there’s no harm in telling you. On Yellow Earth Ridge, which is within our prefecture’s jurisdiction, a gang of eight bandits drugged the 15 men who were escorting a convoy of birthday presents that Governor Liang of Daming (4,2) was sending to Premier Cai (4). They made off with 11 loads of valuables worth 100,000 strings. We have apprehended one of the bandits, a man named Bai Sheng, and he told us that the seven main conspirators are in your

county. The premier has sent a man to our prefecture demanding that this case be solved. I hope you will help me do it at once.”

Hearing this, Song Jiang told He Tao, “Even if it were just an order from the prefect, how would we dare to not lend a hand, much less when the order is coming from the premier. Who are the seven men that Bai Sheng has named?”

“I’ll be honest with you,” He Tao said. “Their ringleader is Chao Gai, the ward chief at East Bank Village. As for the other six, we don’t know their names. We beg your utmost diligence.”

“[Scoff] That Chao Gai is a dirty scoundrel,” Song Jiang said. “Everyone in the county hates him. Now that he has pulled this stunt, we’ll make him pay!”

“Then please help us apprehend him,” He Tao requested.

“No problem. That’s easy. It’ll be like catching turtles in a jug -- just stretch out your hand. But there’s just one thing. Because this is a sealed order from the prefect, the magistrate himself must personally open it so that he can dispatch men to help with the arrest. I am but a lowly clerk and dare not open this order myself. This is official business of the utmost importance. We must not let it leak out.”

“Sir, you are wise indeed,” He Tao said. “Please take me to see the magistrate.”

“The magistrate was tending to official business all morning and is taking a break. Please wait a little while. When the court is back in session, I will come get you.”

“I hope you will do everything in your power to help us accomplish our mission.”

“Of course. That’s what I should do. It goes without saying. I must go home and take care of a few things now, so please sit and wait for just a bit.”

“Go ahead, sir. I will wait here for you.”

As Song Jiang walked out, he told the waiter, “If that officer wants more tea, put it all on my tab.”

He then left the teahouse and walked down the street. As soon as he turned the corner, Song Jiang's steps quickened. First, he went and told his attendant to stay outside the door of the courthouse.

"When the magistrate resumes court, go to the teahouse and tell the officer that I'll be back soon," Song Jiang instructed his attendant. He then unhitched his horse, led it out through the back door, hopped on, and slowly rode out of town through the east gate.

But as soon as he went out through the gate, he gave the horse two strong lashes, and the horse galloped off toward the east.

Hmm ... so where is this Song Jiang going? And who the heck is he anyway that He Tao would kneel and kowtow to him upon hearing his name? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see what happens when allegiance to the law and allegiance to the man collide. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!