

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 29.

Last time, Chao Gai and company found much more than a refuge on Liangshan, thanks to Lin Chong finally getting fed up with the two-faced antics of the bandit leader Wang Lun. One knife thrust to the heart, one severed head, and many rounds of polite back-and-forths later, Chao Gai found himself the new leader, ushering in a golden age for Liangshan, whatever that means for a group of bandits.

The first big thing on the to-do list in this new golden age was to repel an attack by a government fleet since, oh yeah, we're still on the lam for that heist we pulled. The fleet, led by a district garrison commander named Huang (2) An (1), advanced on the marsh around Liangshan, but soon ran into a trap. Seeing the situation go south, Huang An hopped onto a fast boat and tried to flee.

But as he was rowing through the reeds, he was met by a small boat. On the boat stood Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil. Reaching out with a long hook, Liu Tang grabbed hold of Huang An's boat and leaped onto it. Before Huang An could do anything, Liu Tang had him by the waist and warned him to not struggle if he wanted to live. Meanwhile, among Huang An's men, those who could swim jumped into the water, where most of them were killed by arrows. And those who did not dare to jump into the water were captured alive along with their boats.

While the bandit forces finished mopping up, Liu Tang dragged Huang An onto shore. From the distance came Chao Gai, the new leader of Liangshan, and the Daoist priest Gongsun Sheng, aka Dragon in the Cloud, riding with 50-some men to provide backup. They captured almost 200 enemies alive and seized countless ships, which they stashed at the naval camp on the south side of the mountain.

All the chieftains now returned to the fort and gathered at the Hall of Honor. There, they shed their armor and sat down, and tied the enemy commander Huang An to a column. They then started handing out awards to the lackeys before doling out credits to the chieftains. Lin Chong was credited with seizing 600-some fine horses. Du Qian and Song Wan were responsible for the victory at the east harbor, while

the three Ruan brothers were credited with the victory at the west harbor. And of course, Liu Tang got credit for capturing Huang An.

Next came the victory feast. There were home-brewed wines; fresh lotus roots and fish from the marsh; peaches, plums, pears, dates, and other fruits from the woods on the south side of the mountain; and chickens, pigs, geese, and ducks and other livestock that they raised. So these may be bloodthirsty bandits who won't blink at slaughtering men by the hundreds, but they were also very keen about sourcing their food from local, organic sources.

Everyone partied to their hearts' content, celebrating the big victory in their first battle since Chao Gai's arrival. In the middle of this feast, a lackey brought a message from Zhu Gui, the chieftain who was running recon out of the tavern at the foot of the mountain. The lackey reported that Zhu Gui had gotten intel that a group of a few dozen merchants was going to be passing through the area soon.

"Perfect! We just so happen to be short on money," said Chao Gai, since apparently you can blow through 100,000 strings' worth of loot in a few days. "Who will take this on?"

The three Ruan brothers volunteered, and Chao Gai told them to hurry back. So they changed clothes, grabbed some weapons, and set out with about 100 men, departing by boat from Golden Sand Beach and rowing toward Zhu Gui's tavern.

After the Ruan brothers left, Chao Gai was worried that they might not have enough men, so he sent Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil to lead another 100 men to go back them up. Chao Gai told Liu Tang, "Just take the merchants' stuff, not their lives."

Hey look, principles. Don't take lives, just livelihoods. Truly this was a new era for the honorable men of Liangshan. After Liu Tang headed off, Chao Gai waited until around midnight. When no word had come back about the raid, he got worried and sent the chieftains Du Qian and Song Wan at the head of another 50-some men to go provide more backup. You figure 200-some armed bandits should be plenty enough to rob a few dozen merchants.

Chao Gai and his three top chieftains -- Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, and Lin Chong -- sat up drinking until dawn, at which point lackeys brought good news. They said, "Thanks to Chieftain Zhu Gui, we got 20-some cartloads of money and valuables, plus 40-some donkeys and horses."

"We didn't kill anyone, did we?" Chao Gai asked.

"Those merchants saw how ferocious we were and abandoned all their belongings and fled. We didn't hurt any of them," the lackey replied.

Chao Gai was delighted by this. "We just arrived here, so we should not hurt people," he said. I guess his definition of "hurt" is limited to only physical harm, not you know, all the material harm caused by taking all their valuables. I also love the "we just got here" rationale. When does THAT grace period expire?

Anyway, Chao Gai rewarded the lackey messenger with a piece of silver and then went all the way down to Golden Sand Beach with wine and fruit to welcome the victorious men. He saw his chieftains coming ashore with carts loaded with loot, and then they told the boats to go back for the horses and donkeys. Everyone was delighted. Once they all drank a cup of wine, they sent someone to fetch the chieftain Zhu Gui so that he could join them in the main fort for the celebration.

All the chieftains now assembled in the Hall of Honor and sat in a circle. The lackeys brought in all the loot from the night's work and started opening one bale after another. Clothing and fabric were stacked on one side, while merchandise were stacked on the other side, and gold and silver were piled up in the center. Everyone was delighted by the size of the haul. They told the lackeys overseeing the stronghold's supplies to store away half of everything for a rainy day. The remaining half was divided into two portions. One portion was divided among the 11 chieftains, while the other portion was distributed to the other 700-some bandits.

Now, as for the prisoners they had captured from yesterday's battle with the government fleet, those guys were marked with a tattoo on their faces. The strong ones were sent to do menial labor like

feeding horses and cutting firewood, while the weak ones were tasked with looking after carts and cutting grass for fodder. As for their commander, Huang An, he was locked up in a building in the rear of the fortress.

All this business taken care of, Chao Gai now said to the other chieftains, "When we first came here, we were only hoping to find a refuge, to serve as junior officers under Wang Lun. But then Instructor Lin graciously yielded the leadership to me. And I never expected that we would have back-to-back causes for celebration. The first was our victory over the government troops, which netted us many prisoners, horses, and boats, not to mention their commander Huang An. The second was getting all this loot. We owe all this to your talents, brothers!"

"We would have obtained nothing without heaven's blessings upon you, big brother!" the chieftains replied.

Chao Gai then said to Wu Yong, his military strategist, "The seven of us owe our lives to clerk Song Jiang and constable Zhu Tong. As the ancients said, 'It is inhuman to not repay kindness.' We owe our current happiness and prosperity to them. We must gather up some money and send someone to deliver it to Song Jiang and Zhu Tong at Yuncheng County. That's the most important thing. Also, Bai Sheng is still locked up in prison at Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. We must save him."

"Brother, don't worry; I have a plan," Wu Yong said. "Mr. Song is a man of honor; he does not seek our gratitude. But even so, we must do what is proper. As soon as things are a bit more settled here, we will send a brother to take care of it. As for Bai Sheng, we can send someone who is not known in Jizhou to go push some bribes around so that they will relax their security so that it'll be easier to get him out. Meanwhile, we must stockpile food, build boats, craft weapons, strengthen our fortifications, add quarters, and get ready to face government troops."

"In that case, we will follow your wise counsel," Chao Gai said.

We'll leave our bandit friends in their plush new life for now and check on the survivors of the doomed attack on Liangshan. The few soldiers who escaped the slaughter in the marsh fled back to Jizhou Prefecture and told the prefect what happened and how no one could even get near bandits, much less arrest them. Plus, the waterways in that marsh were numerous and confusing, making it impossible to win a fight there.

When the prefect heard this, he could only lament to the emissary from the premier, "Before, Inspector He Tao lost lots of men and only he made it back alive, minus two ears. He's still recovering at home, and none of the 500 men he took with him came back. So I sent the district garrison commander Huang An and a high-level police officer from my office to lead another army to arrest the bandits, and they, too, were lost. Huang An has been captured alive, and countless soldiers have been killed. There's no way to win. What should we do?"

Just as the prefect was fretting, a lieutenant came in with even worse news.

"A new prefect is coming and is approaching the reception pavilion by the East Gate," he said.

Welp, I guess at least now this prefect doesn't have to worry about those bandits anymore. He rushed out to the east gate to welcome his replacement. The new prefect was already there, so the current prefect welcomed him and took him into the pavilion. After they exchanged greetings, the new guy handed over the paperwork. They then went back to the administrative office to take care of the handover of the prefect's seal, the records of the prefecture's storehouses, and various other procedural matters.

After that, they sat down to a welcome banquet. During the banquet, the outgoing prefect told his replacement that oh by the way, there's this group of bandits on a mountain near here that's been slaughtering my men by the hundreds. Well I guess you'll have to do something about them. Good luck.

As he listened, the new guy's face turned to the color of ash. He thought to himself, "Premier Cai said he was giving me a promotion. But where the hell has he sent me? There are no strong troops here. How can I apprehend those outlaws? And what if they come here demanding grain?"

While the new guy was worrying about his bandit problems, the old prefect had problems of his own to worry about, as he packed his bags and headed back to the capital to await punishment for his failure. The novel doesn't mention him ever again, but I hope he at least got some good sun out on that island where they sent disgraced officials.

So anyway, the new prefect, upon taking office, met with a newly appointed garrison commander to discuss recruiting more soldiers and replenishing their forces to prepare for another fight against the outlaws of Liangshan. In the meantime, he wrote to the Council of Administration, requesting that neighboring prefectures be directed to give all possible aid. He also sent out a decree to the counties under his jurisdiction, ordering them to join in the hunt and to keep a close watch on their borders.

When that order from the new prefect arrived in Yuncheng County, the county magistrate ordered his clerk to relay those instructions to the villages and towns within the county. The clerk, of course, was none other than Song Jiang, the man who had given Chao Gai and company the heads up they needed to slip through the authorities' hands.

After reading the decree, Song Jiang thought to himself, "Who knew Chao Gai and his people would commit such a serious offense. They hijacked the birthday gifts, killed a bunch of cops, injured Inspector He Tao, slaughtered so many government troops, and captured Huang An alive. That's the kind of crime that would lead to the extermination of entire clans. Even though they may have been forced into it, it's still not forgivable in the eyes of the law. If anything should go wrong, they'd be in big trouble."

He brooded on those thoughts for a while, and then told his assistant, a man named Zhang Wenyan (2,3), to draw up the instructions and send the prefect's orders to the villages. While Zhang Wenyan tended to that, Song Jiang left the office.

He had not gone but 20 steps when someone suddenly called out to him from behind. He turned and saw, sigh, Mrs. Wang. Now, this Mrs. Wang was a matchmaker, and she was approaching with another woman. Oh boy.

Well, the good news was that Mrs. Wang was not there to make a match on this occasion. The less good news was that she was there to ask Song Jiang for a favor. "You're in luck," she told the other woman as they approached. "This is our charitable Mr. Song!"

"What do you want to talk to me about?" Song Jiang asked.

Mrs. Wang blocked his path and pointed at the other woman, saying, "Sir, her family is not from here. They came from the capital. It was the three of them -- her, her husband Mr. Yan (2), and their daughter Poxi (2,1). Her husband is a good singer and taught their daughter many ballads as well. Her daughter is just 18 and is kind of good looking. The three of them came to Shandong Province to join the household of an official that they knew, but they couldn't find him. They ended up drifting to here. But the people here don't much care for music and entertainment, so they are struggling to make a living. They are staying in a flat in a quiet lane. But yesterday, her husband caught the epidemic and died. She doesn't have any money to bury him. She doesn't know what to do, so she came to ask me to find a man who would have her daughter. But I told her, 'Where can I find anyone who would be so good at a time like this?' And I didn't know where she could borrow money. It was looking hopeless, but then we saw you passing by, so we rushed over. I hope you can take pity on her and help her buy a coffin."

"Oh, in that case, both of you come with me," Song Jiang said. "We'll go to the tavern at the end of the street to borrow some paper and brush. I'll write a note to Chen (2) the Third, who runs the coffin shop in the east part of town. You can go there to get a coffin. And do you have money to live on?"

“Sir, to tell you the truth,” said Mrs. Yan (2), “we don’t even have money to bury the dead, much less money to live on.”

“Then I’ll give you 10 taels of silver for your living expenses.”

“You’re like my parents reborn!” a grateful Mrs. Yan said. “I will repay you, even if I have to serve as your donkey or horse.”

“Say no such thing,” Song Jiang said. He took out a 10-tael piece of silver and gave it to Mrs. Yan, and then they parted ways. Mrs. Yan went and got the coffin and buried her husband. After all was said and done, she still had about five or six taels of silver left, which she and her daughter used for their daily expenses.

One day, Mrs. Yan went to Song Jiang’s home to thank him. While there, she noticed that something was missing in his home -- a woman. So she went next door to his neighbor, the aforementioned matchmaker, Mrs. Wang.

“I didn’t see a woman at Mr. Song’s house. Has he been married?” Mrs. Yan asked.

“I only know that his family lives in the Song Family Village,” Mrs. Wang said. “I haven’t heard anything about a wife. He’s working in town as a magisterial clerk and only has temporary quarters here. He’s always handing out money for coffins and medicine and helping people in distress, so I’m guessing he’s not married.”

So yeah, notice the author’s implication there -- that apparently being married to a woman would be a deterrent to generosity because a wife would not allow it. Anyway, Mrs. Yan now said, “My daughter is very pretty, sings well, and knows all sorts of amusing pursuits. When she was little and we were in the capital, she used to wander around the brothels. All the brothel managers thought she was adorable. One or two famous courtesans even offered several times to buy her, but I declined. I was worried that my husband and I would not have anyone to take care of us in our old age, so I refused to sell her. Who



knew that she would suffer for it now. When I went to thank Mr. Song, I saw that he had no woman, so maybe you can go talk to him for me? If he's looking for someone, I'm willing to let him have my daughter. Thanks to you, I got help from him a few days ago. I have no way to repay him, but this I can do."

Mrs. Wang was never one to pass up an opportunity, so she went to see Song Jiang the next day to propose the match. At first, Song Jiang wanted no part of it. But Mrs. Wang was also never one to give up. After a prolonged siege, Song Jiang relented and agreed to the match. Now, I should note that this was not an official marriage, as in Song Jiang taking Mrs. Yan's daughter as his wife. Instead, this was more like him purchasing the girl as a mistress. But at this time, that kind of relationship was not deemed scandalous, as many men of means kept mistresses outside the home.

Of course, Song Jiang needed to take care of his new significant other. So he took a house in the western part of town, bought some furniture, and set up Mrs. Yan and her daughter there. Within two weeks, his mistress, Yan Poxi, was covered in finery from head to toe. And soon, even her mother was wearing some fancy clothes, and mother and daughter lived in luxury.

So everything was going great, right? Well, not quite. There was one tiny problem -- the bedroom. In the beginning, Song Jiang visited his mistress every night and, ahem, spent the night there. But gradually, his visits became fewer and farther in between. The reason? Well, here's where the novel shows some of its unfortunate misogynistic attitudes toward women. According to the novel, Song Jiang was visiting his mistress less often because, quote, Song Jiang was a hero and was only interested in learning weapons. Sex did not have great appeal to him. And to continue to quote the novel, it said that his mistress, Poxi, was a frivolous girl of only 18, in the bloom of her youth, so she did not care for Song Jiang.

So before we go on, let's just pause for a second and acknowledge that "Sex has no appeal to heroes and girls of 18 are frivolous, shallow creatures" is not an attitude in line with contemporary social values, nor is it much of a narrative device if we're being honest. Yet, that's what we have to work with here since, you know, we're in a novel written in the 14th century. Since we're telling the story as it was written, we'll just have to roll with it. But make no mistake. This podcast does not endorse the novel's horribly misogynistic views on women, sex, and gender relations, views that will unfortunately rear their ugly heads on multiple occasions in our story, and I'll do my best to call them out as they come up.

Oh, and also, a quick note on the girl's name, Poxi. That's actually not her name, but rather a term that means a woman in the brothels. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean she was a prostitute. That term includes women who made their living as singers, entertainers, or just drinking companions for the male patrons. And from what Mrs. Yan had said earlier, it sounds like that's her daughter was just a singer. But those women were pretty much saddled with the same social prejudices as prostitutes. So the novel here is essentially calling her Yan (2) the Brothel Girl, which only adds to her negative depiction.

So anyway, one day, Song Jiang happened to bring his assistant Zhang Wenyuan over to his mistress's house for a drink, and this turned out to be a mistake. That Zhang Wenyuan was commonly called Little Zhang the Third. He had a handsome, fair face, with dark brows, fine eyes, white teeth and ruby lips. He was also rather fond of pleasure houses and had learned all the arts of romancing women. On top of that, he was also an accomplished musician and could play pretty much every stringed or wind instrument. And just in case you thought those were good characteristics, the novel is here to tell you that no, those are not desirable traits for a man. Instead we should all be upstanding, sex-hating paragons of virtue and honor like Song Jiang.

Now, as we just mentioned, Song Jiang's mistress, Yan Poxi, used to be an entertainer who loved to drink and frolic, so as soon as she saw this Zhang Wenyuan -- who also loved to drink and frolic -- she

took a liking to him. And that Zhang Wenyuan did not miss the many “come hither” glances that she was casting his way, and he definitely did not miss the flirtatious words she whispered to him while Song Jiang was in the bathroom.

As the old saying goes, “The tree doesn’t sway if the wind doesn’t blow, and the water doesn’t get muddy if the boat doesn’t shake.” And soon there was a whole lot of blowing and shaking going on. After that first meeting, Zhang Wenyuan started visiting Yan Poxi when Song Jiang wasn’t there. He would pretend that he was looking for his boss, and she would be like, “Oh he’s not here, but why don’t you stay for ... tea.” And pretty soon, they were hooking up on the regular.

Now that she had Zhang Wenyuan, Yan Poxi started to neglect Song Jiang altogether. When Song Jiang visited her, she would just insult him and act like she couldn’t stand being in the same room as him. Being a sex-hating hero, Song Jiang just pretty much stopped caring, and only visited once every 10 days or so. In the meantime, Yan Poxi and Zhang Wenyuan were stuck to each other like glue. He would call at night and leave in the morning. And pretty soon, everyone on the street knew what the deal was.

Some of the gossip even got back to Song Jiang, but he wasn’t sure whether to believe it. And he thought to himself, “It’s not like she’s my real wife, formally chosen by my parents. So if she’s not interested in me, what do I care? I’ll just not visit her.”

So Song Jiang just stopped going over to the house for several months. Mrs. Yan sent him many invitations, but he just kept finding excuses to not show up.

One day, as evening was approaching, Song Jiang left the courthouse and went to the teahouse. As he sat sipping his cup of tea, he saw a big man walk by. This guy was wearing a white broad-brimmed felt hat, a black and white robe, leg wraps, and hemp sandals. A broadsword hung from his waist, and a large bundle sat on his back. He was walking so fast that he was covered in sweat and was huffing and puffing, and as he walked, he kept looking over at the courthouse.

Noticing something peculiar about this guy, Song Jiang got up and followed him from a distance. After about 20 steps, the man suddenly turned around and spotted Song Jiang. Now, Song Jiang thought he looked familiar, but couldn't remember where he had seen this guy. And the guy also seemed to recognize Song Jiang a little bit, as he paused and looked at Song Jiang, but didn't say anything. That further piqued Song Jiang's curiosity, but he did not dare to approach the guy and ask him who he was.

The man now stopped by a barber shop and asked the shopkeeper, "Sir, who's that clerk over there?"

"That's Mr. Song Jiang," the shopkeeper said.

The man now walked straight over to Song Jiang, bowed deeply, and said, "Sir, do you recognize me?"

"You do look a little bit familiar," Song Jiang said.

"Can we step aside for a word?"

So the two ducked into a quiet little street.

"That tavern over there is perfect," the man said.

So they went into the tavern, went upstairs, and sat down in a secluded room. The man laid down his broadsword, untied his bundle, stashed them under the table, and then suddenly fell to his knees and kowtowed to Song Jiang. Song Jiang hurriedly returned the greeting and asked him for his name.

"Great benefactor, have you forgotten me?" the man asked.

"Who are you, brother? You really do look a bit familiar, but I can't remember where we've met."

"I met your acquaintance at ward chief Chao's estate. You saved our lives. I am Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil."

Song Jiang gasped.

"Brother, you've got some gall. Good thing the cops didn't see you, or there would've been trouble!"

“I had to come thank you for your kindness, even if it meant my life!”

You know, I’m sure Song Jiang appreciated the gesture, but you have to think that there’s got to be a better option than to send someone with as striking an appearance as Liu Tang. I mean, there was a reason he was called the Red-Haired Devil. And Liu Tang doesn’t know it yet, but this act of gratitude is going to end up causing some headaches for Song Jiang. To see what those headaches are, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang gets dragged into a night of awkward silences and cold shoulders. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.