

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 33.

Last time, Song Jiang was hiding from the law at the estate of Chai Jin, the Little Whirlwind. While there, he met a hero named Wu Song. The two became fast friends and eventually sworn brothers. But soon, Wu Song decided to go back to his home county to look for his older brother, so we'll follow him on his adventures.

After bidding Song Jiang a teary goodbye, Wu Song hit the road heading toward Qinghe (1,2) County, his home. As he walked, he thought to himself, "Song Jiang really lived up to his reputation. What a worthwhile man to have as a sworn brother!"

After a few days of travel, Wu Song entered the boundaries of Yanggu (2,3) County, which bordered Qinghe County. It was noon, he was still a ways off from the county seat, and he was getting hungry. He spotted a tavern up ahead. In front of the tavern stood a flag pole, from which flew a banner that read, "Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge."

Wu Song went inside, sat down at a table, and shouted, "Tavern keeper, bring me wine!"

The tavern owner came over and placed in front of him three bowls, a pair of chopsticks, and a plate of warm vegetables. He then filled one bowl to the brim with wine. Wu Song picked up the bowl and gulped it down in one breath.

"This wine's got kicks!" he said. "Tavern keeper, sell me something filling to go with the wine."

"We only have cooked beef," the tavern owner said.

"That's fine. Cut up two or three catties for me."

So the tavern owner cut up two catties of beef, which is a bit more than two-and-a-half pounds. He placed the beef on a big platter and put it in front of Wu Song. He then filled another bowl with wine, which Wu Song promptly emptied and raved, "Great wine!"

The tavern owner then filled the third bowl, and Wu Song drank that in the blink of an eye as well. But after that, the tavern owner stopped coming over to refill the bowls. Wu Song banged on the table and shouted, "Tavern keeper, why aren't you pouring more wine?!"

"Sir, if you want more meat, I'll bring it right out."

"I want more meat, AND I want more wine."

"Sir, I can bring you more meat, but no more wine."

"Well, that's odd. Why not?"

"Sir, you must have seen the banner out front, which clearly says, 'Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge.' "

"What does that mean?"

The tavern owner explained, "Our wine may be just a village brew, but it's as fragrant as the aged wines. All my patrons are drunk after just three bowls, to the point where they can't cross the ridge that lies ahead. That's why the banner says, 'Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge.' So whenever a patron has had three bowls, we stop asking if they want more."

Wu Song laughed and said, "So that's it. Well, I've had three bowls, why am I not drunk?"

"My wine is called 'Fragrance that Seeps through the Bottle.' It's also called 'Collapse Outside the Door.' It's smooth going down, but you'll start to feel it in a bit."

"Enough of this nonsense!" Wu Song scoffed. "It's not like I'm drinking your wine for free. Bring me three more bowls!"

The tavern keeper sized up Wu Song, and sure enough, he wasn't showing any signs of Asian glow, so he was like, alright fine, here's three more bowls. But Wu Song wasn't satisfied with that.

"This is great wine!" he said. "I'll pay you for every bowl as I drink. Just keep them coming."

"Sir, don't drink too much. You're going to pass out, and there's no medicine that'll bring you around."

“Stop BS-ing! Even if you drugged this wine, I would be able to smell it.”

Seeing that he wasn't going to convince Wu Song to stop drinking, the tavern owner relented, and brought another three bowls.

“Bring me another two catties of meat!” Wu Song said as he chugged.

The tavern owner did as he asked, bringing out the meat, along with another three bowls of wine. Wu Song was on a bender now. He took out some loose pieces of silver and asked, “Is this enough money to cover the wine and the meat?”

“More than enough. I'll get you some change.”

“No need! Just bring more wine.”

“Sir, if you really want more wine, I still have maybe five or six bowls left. But I don't know if you can drink any more.”

Well, that sounded like a challenge, and Wu Song was like, bring it. Bring it all!

“You're a big guy,” the tavern owner said. “If you pass out, how can I prop you up?”

“If I need you to prop me up, then I'm no hero!”

When the tavern owner still refused to bring out the rest of the wine, Wu Song lost his temper.

“Look! It's not like I'm drinking for free! Don't piss me off, or I'll smash up the place!”

The tavern owner decided it was best not to mess with the drunk who was insisting he wasn't even buzzing in the slightest. So he brought out the last six bowls of wine, which Wu Song again chugged, making it a total of 15 bowls of grain alcohol ingested.

Finally, Wu Song got up, grabbed his wooden staff, and said, “I'm not drunk at all.” As he walked outside, he looked up at the banner and laughed, “Ha! ‘Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge.’ Yeah, sure!”

And then he started walking toward the ridge. But just then, the tavern owner came running out and shouted, “Sir, where are you going?!”

“What do you want?! I paid you in full!”

“I’m looking out for you. Come back here and read this copy of an official proclamation.”

“What proclamation?”

“Right now there’s a ferocious tiger roaming the ridge up ahead, and it’s been killing people at night. It’s already taken the lives of 20-some, 30 men. The authorities have ordered local hunters to bring it down, and there are lots of proclamations posted on the roads near the ridge. They instruct travelers to form large groups and cross only during the six hours between late morning and early afternoon. At all other times, the ridge is closed. No one is allowed to cross alone; you must wait for a group. It’s getting late, and I saw you setting off without a word, so I was afraid you would throw away your life. Why don’t you stay here tonight, and then tomorrow, once there’s a group of 20-some men, then you can cross together.”

But Wu Song just laughed. “I’m from Qinghe County. I’ve crossed this Jingyang (3,2) Ridge probably 20 times, and I’ve never seen or heard of any tiger. Stop trying to scare me with that nonsense. And even if there is a tiger, I’m not afraid!”

“I’m trying to save you,” the tavern owner said. “If you don’t believe me, come take a look at the official proclamation.”

“Balls! I’m not afraid of any tiger! Why are you trying to keep me here? Are you planning to kill me in the middle of the night and take my stuff? Is that why you’re trying to scare me with this bull about a tiger?”

“Look here!” the tavern owner said with indignance. “Talk about no good deed goes unpunished. If you don’t believe me, then help yourself!”

As the tavern owner stepped back inside shaking his head, Wu Song grabbed his wooden staff and strode toward the ridge. After about a mile or so, he arrived at the foot of the ridge. There, he noticed a

large tree whose bark had been peeled off, exposing the white trunk. And on the trunk someone had written two lines of text. Wu Song could read a little bit, and here's what he made out:

“Recently a tiger has been killing people on Jingyang (3,2) Ridge. Travelers must only cross in groups during the six hours between late morning and early afternoon. Do not take risks.”

But Wu Song once again laughed it off. “This must be a scam by that tavern owner, trying to scare travelers into staying at his place. What do I have to be afraid of?!”

So he continued his journey and began to ascend the ridge. It was now about 4 p.m., and the sun was already sinking toward the horizon. Riding the buzz from the wine, Wu Song just kept going up. He had not gone far when he came across a dilapidated temple dedicated to a mountain god. On the front door of the temple was a proclamation carrying an official seal. Wu Song stopped and read the proclamation, which said:

“A notice from Yanggu (2,3) County: Recently a tiger has appeared on Jingyang Ridge and has been killing people. Local hunters have been given a deadline to bring down the tiger, but they have not yet succeeded. Passing travelers should cross the ridge in groups between late morning and early afternoon. Crossing alone or during any other time is prohibited, lest the tiger take your lives. Let this be known to all.”

Only now was Wu Song finally convinced that the tavern owner was telling the truth. He started to turn around and head back to the tavern, but then stopped in his tracks.

“If I go back there, the tavern keeper is going to laugh at me,” he thought to himself. “What kind of a hero would I be then? Ah screw it! What's there to be afraid of? I'll just keep going and see what happens.”

So Wu Song kept going, and by now he was buzzing big time. With his broad-brimmed felt hat hanging on his back, and his staff tucked under his arm, he staggered up the ridge. When he turned to

look at the sun, he saw that it was sinking fast. It was now the 10th month on the Chinese calendar, which is about November, and that meant short days and long nights and an early-setting sun.

As he continued, Wu Song mumbled to himself, "What tiger? People are just scaring themselves!"

After walking for a bit longer, Wu Song started to really feel the effects of the 15 bowls of wine. He was feeling warm, so he unbuttoned his shirt and stumbled into some woods. There, he spotted a large smooth rock. He staggered over to it, laid down his staff, and flopped down on the rock.

He was just about to doze off when suddenly, a wild wind swept through the woods, followed by a loud roar and a crash as a ferocious tiger leaped out from the trees behind him.

"Oh sh*t!" Wu Song exclaimed as he rolled off, grabbed his staff, and hid behind the rock.

That tiger was hungry and thirsty, and it was in the mood for some drunken human meat. With a push of its hindlegs, it leaped high into the air toward Wu Song. By now, Wu Song was so startled that all the wine he drank had turned into cold sweat. In the blink of an eye, the tiger was coming down, but Wu Song quickly dodged its attack and slipped behind it.

The tiger now dug its front paws into the ground and tried to side-swipe Wu Song with its body. But again Wu Song avoided the blow. That was followed by an earth-shaking roar as the tiger tried to lash Wu Song with its rigid tail. But once again, Wu Song managed to sidestep the attack.

So according to the novel, those were the only three moves that tigers had, so when none of those attacks found its mark, the tiger lost much of its ferocity. But it was still a tiger, and it now let out another roar and turned around to pounce on Wu Song again. When Wu Song saw the beast turning, he gripped his wooden staff and brought it down with all his might toward the tiger's face.

There was a loud crack, but the staff did not land on the tiger. Turns out, Wu Song was in such a panic that he had swung the staff into a tree trunk instead. The impact was so hard that the staff splintered into two, leaving Wu Song holding just half a stick in his hand.

The tiger now leaped toward him again. Wu Song backtracked 10 paces, but the tiger kept coming and its claws flashed in front of Wu Song's face. Wu Song quickly tossed aside the broken staff and grabbed the tiger by the skin on its head and pushed it down to the ground. While the tiger struggled to get free, Wu Song kept kicking it in its face and eyes.

The tiger growled and dug its paws into the ground so hard that they made a pit. Wu Song now forced the tiger's face down and shoved its mouth into the yellow soil. By now, the tiger was exhausted. Wu Song, meanwhile, kept his left hand's iron grip on the tiger's scruff and lifted up his right hand, made a fist as big as a blacksmith's hammer, and brought it down on the tiger's face with all his might. Then he punched again. And again. And again. And again. And again.

Fueled by adrenaline, alcohol, fear, and rage, Wu Song landed one punch after another. By the time the punch count surpassed 70, the tiger was bleeding from its eyes, mouth, nose, and ears. Wu Song kept punching and punching and punching, until the tiger slowly stopped moving. By now, breath was barely coming out of its mouth, but Wu Song wasn't done yet. Just to make sure he finished the job, he picked up part of the broken staff and went to town on the tiger some more, until all traces of life left the beast.

So, this brutal, bare-fisted dispatching of a tiger is one of the most memorable scenes in the novel and one of those tales that's become ubiquitous in Chinese culture, and conservation is what again? Needless to say, no majestic megafauna was harmed in the production of this podcast, and please do not try this at home, although, if you are dumb enough to want to try your luck against a wild tiger after ingesting unhealthy amounts of grain alcohol, well, I guess that's why they have the Darwin Awards.

Anyway, after making sure the tiger was really dead, Wu Song thought to himself, "I should carry this dead tiger off the ridge."

Now, I don't know exactly what subspecies this unfortunate tiger belonged to, but on the low end, a tiger weighs somewhere around 200 pounds. That's a helluva load to carry off a hill even when you're

fresh, much less when you just spent half an hour bludgeoning it to death. So it was not surprising that when Wu Song reached down to pull the carcass from the bloody puddle it was lying in, his limbs just went soft and he collapsed to the ground. He staggered over to a big boulder and sat down.

As he slowly regained some strength, he thought to himself, "It's dark. If another tiger appears, how can I fight it off? Let me get off this ridge first, and I'll come back and worry about this tomorrow."

Now, that was probably the first bright idea he's had since setting foot in the tavern. He retrieved his hat and slowly made his way down the ridge.

He had not gone far when suddenly, there was movement in the tall grass beside him, and two shapes emerged. Wu Song looked and saw the outlines of two tigers.

"Ah crap! I'm done for!" he cried.

As he panicked, the two tigers stood up on their hind legs. But they did not pounce as he expected. Instead, they just remained standing.

Taking a second look, Wu Song realized that these were not actually tigers, but men wearing tiger skins. Each man held a five-pronged pitchfork, and when they saw Wu Song, they were taken aback.

"You must have the heart of a crocodile, the gall of a panther, and the legs of a lion!" they exclaimed. "How much courage must you have to stumble across this ridge alone, in the dark, unarmed?! Are you a man or a demon?!"

"Who are you?!" Wu Song asked.

"We're local hunters."

"What are you doing on this ridge?"

"Don't you know?" the hunters asked with surprise. "There is a huge tiger on this ridge, and it's been killing people every night. It's taken seven or eight of our fellow hunters, and countless other travelers. The county magistrate has ordered the leaders of the nearby towns and villages, and us hunters, to capture it. But that beast is so ferocious that it's hard to get near it, so who would dare to press their

luck? We've endured quite a few canings for failing to capture that beast. Tonight it's our turn again. The two of us and 10 villagers have set up spring-loaded bows with poisoned arrows all over the place. We were lying in wait when we saw you stomping off the ridge, and we were alarmed. Who are you? Did you see the tiger?"

"I am a native of Qinghe (1,2) County, my name is Wu Song. I ran into that tiger in the woods on the ridge just now, and I beat it to death with my fist."

Uhh ... sure you did, buddy. Sure you did. And is that wine I smell on you? When the hunters expressed their skepticism, Wu Song told them, "If you don't believe me, look at the blood stain on my clothes." He then recounted how he killed the tiger, which left the hunters both dazed and elated. They sounded a signal, and 10 villagers appeared, all holding pitchforks, knives, spears, and such.

"Why didn't these guys follow you up the ridge?" Wu Song asked.

"As deadly as that beast was, who among them would dare?" the hunters said.

The hunters then told their comrades what Wu Song had told them, and they were similarly skeptical, so Wu Song was like, fine, follow me; let's go check it out.

So they lit some torches and followed Wu Song back up the ridge, where they indeed found the tiger, lying dead in a great heap. Everyone was ecstatic. They sent one of the men to go back and alert the village chief and the leading family in charge. Meanwhile, a few of the men strapped the tiger to a pole and carried it off the ridge.

When they arrived at the foot of the ridge, a crowd of some 80 people had already gathered, all noisy and animated. They formed a procession, with the dead tiger in front, and Wu Song following behind, seated on an open litter. They marched to the home of the leading family in the village, where the master of the house welcomed them in front of his manor and had the tiger carried into the thatched parlor.

Some 30 people now came to pay their respects to Wu Song and asked him who he was and where he was from. Wu Song told them, "I am a native of the neighboring Qinghe (1,2) County. My name is Wu Song, and I'm the second son in my family. I was coming back from Cangzhou (1,1) Prefecture. Last night, I got wasted at a tavern on the other side of the ridge. When I went up the ridge, I ran into that beast."

He then told his tiger-slaying tale again, and everyone praised his valor. The hunters then presented him with some game and wine, while the master of the manor arranged for guest quarters so he could sleep, which Wu Song desperately needed after the night he's had.

The next morning, a messenger was dispatched to bring the news to the county seat. Meanwhile, the villagers prepared a special litter to carry the tiger to the county seat. At daybreak, Wu Song got out of bed, washed up, and found that his host had prepared a cooked sheep and two buckets of wine in front of the hall for him.

After he got dressed, Wu Song went out to greet everyone, and they all toasted him and said, "Who knows how many people died because of this beast, and it even made the hunters suffer several canings. Thank goodness a hero like you showed up and rid us of this pest. You've brought us great luck and made the road safe for travel again. We are in your debt!"

"I have no talents," Wu Song humble-bragged. "I was just borrowing from your good fortunes."

After a morning of feasting, they prepared to head out. They put the tiger on the special litter. Members of the prominent families in the village draped Wu Song in silks and flowers. They stored his luggage at the manor for safekeeping, and then the procession set out.

The magistrate of Yanggu (2,3) County had sent emissaries to come escort Wu Song to the county seat. After exchanging greetings, Wu Song sat down on a sedan chair carried by four workmen, and they set out, following the body of the tiger as they headed to the county seat.

The county of Yanggu (2,3) had quite an efficient gossip network, and word of Wu Song's heroic deed had already spread like wildfire. Seated on his sedan chair, Wu Song saw throngs of people jamming the streets and making lots of hubbub as they all pushed and shoved for a look at the man who slayed the tiger with his bare fist.

Upon arriving at the county courthouse, Wu Song got off the sedan chair and entered the main hall, while the tiger's body was placed in the entranceway. The magistrate was already waiting in the hall. When he saw what a strapping young man Wu Song was, and the size of the tiger he slayed, the magistrate thought to himself, "Who else but this man could have killed this ferocious beast?"

He now summoned Wu Song and asked how he killed the tiger. So for the umpteenth time since last night, Wu Song recounted the tale, and everyone who heard it for the first time was left dazed and awed. The magistrate then rewarded him with a few cups of wine and brought out the bounty for killing the tiger -- 1,000 strings of coins.

But when the money was presented to Wu Song, he said to the magistrate, "Thanks to your honor's good fortune, I got lucky and killed this tiger. It's not because of my abilities, so how would I dare to accept this reward? I've heard that because of this tiger, many hunters have suffered punishment at your honor's hand. So why don't we give this money to them?"

"In that case, we'll do as you wish, hero," the magistrate said.

So Wu Song handed the reward money over to the hunters right then and there, an act of generosity that further impressed the magistrate, who just got an idea.

"Even though you are a native of Qinghe County, that's just next door to here," he said to Wu Song. "How about I give you a position here as a constable?"

Wu Song kneeled and bowed in gratitude, saying, "Thank you benefactor for this opportunity. I will be eternally grateful!"

So the magistrate instructed the clerk to draw up the paperwork immediately, appointing Wu Song as a constable in the county police force. All the prominent families in the county came to congratulate him, which of course meant several days of feasting.

One day, after the feasting had finally died down a bit, Wu Song decided to go out for a stroll around the county office. Suddenly, someone shouted from behind, "Constable Wu, you're a big success now! Is that why you don't recognize me anymore?"

Wu Song turned around. As soon as he saw the man who had spoken, he exclaimed, "What?! What are you doing here?!" and fell to his knees.

As it turns out, the man who had called out was none other than his older brother, Wu Dalang (4,2), which literally means Wu the Elder. Remember that Wu Song was on his way to the next county over to see Wu Dalang when he got sidetracked first by the tiger and then by his new gig as a cop. So he certainly did not expect to see his brother here.

"I haven't seen you in more than a year; what are you doing here?!" Wu Song asked.

"Brother, you've been gone a long time," Wu Dalang said. "Why didn't you write me? I was both mad at you and missing you."

"How so?"

"When you were at Qinghe (1,2) County, you always got hauled into court for getting into drunken brawls, and I was always dragged in with you, with not a single moment of peace. Oh how I suffered. That's why I was mad at you. But I recently got married, and then all the people in Qinghe County came to pick on me, and I had no one to stick up for me. When you were home, who would have dared to so much as let out a fart? But now I can't stay there anymore, so I moved here and rented a house. That's why I'm missing you."

So, what's all this about Wu Song's brother being picked on after he got married? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, it's been like two whole episodes since we had a misogynistic portrayal of a female character, so sure let's get back to that. In fact, we'll introduce you to THE quintessential misogynistic portrayal of a female character in Chinese literature. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!