

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 38.

Last time, poor Wu Dalang fell victim to the treachery of his adulterous wife Pan Jinlian, her lover Ximen Qing, and their scheming enabler Mrs. Wang. A bowl of midnight poison later, and Wu Dalang was no more. Now, the three conspirators worked to cover up their tracks. Just about everything was taken care of, but there was the little problem of the coroner, a Mr. He, who would surely notice the telltale signs of death by poisoning as opposed to just death by mysterious chest ailment. Ximen Qing, though, said no problem and invited Mr. He out for tea, or in this case, wine, during which he gave Mr. He a big piece of silver and said, “When you’re examining Wu Dalang’s body, just make sure you do everything JUST RIGHT. That’s all.”

Mr. He knew something was fishy, but he also knew Ximen Qing had money and connections, so he replied, “That’s a trifle of a thing. No need for all this. I would not dare to accept your silver.”

“If you don’t accept it, then you’re refusing me,” Ximen Qing said, with a not-so-veiled threat.

Since he put it that way, Mr. He did not dare to decline further and accepted the bribe, I mean, the unsolicited money to do the RIGHT THING. After a couple more cups of wine, Ximen Qing told the waiter to put it all on his tab and the two men left the tavern.

“Mr. He, please don’t forget,” Ximen Qing said as they were parting ways. “Keep it quiet, and I’ll reward you another day.”

After Ximen Qing left, Mr. He thought to himself, “Well that was strange. I was just on my way to examine Wu Dalang’s body. Why did he give me all that silver? There must be something fishy here.”

When he arrived at Wu Dalang’s home, his men were already waiting, and he asked them what the cause of death was.

“His family said he died of chest pains,” they told him.

Chest pains, eh? Mr. He pulled up the door curtain and went inside, where he was greeted by Mrs. Wang.

“What took you so long?” she asked.

“I got held up by some stuff, so I got here a little late,” Mr. He said.

He then heard the sound of a woman weeping as Pan Jinlian emerged from the backroom, dressed in plain-color garb.

“Madam, please calm yourself. It’s such a pity that your husband has returned to heaven,” Mr. He consoled her.

Dabbing her rather dry eyes, Pan Jinlian said, “You don’t know the half of it! Who would have thought that he would die just a few days after his heart began to hurt? Woe is me!”

Sizing up her appearance, Mr. He thought to himself, “I’ve heard about Wu Dalang’s wife, but had not met her. Turns out this is the kind of wife he had! Looks like there really is something more behind that silver from Ximen Qing.”

Now, let’s just pause for a second here and consider that Mr. He was making a judgment on Pan Jinlian’s character based on ... what exactly? Her appearance? So, here’s a pretty woman; she must be no good. Have we met our misogyny quota for the episode yet? Ok, let’s keep going then.

Mr. He now went to examine Wu Dalang’s body, which was lying on a spare door that had been repurposed as a stretcher. As soon as he pulled back the veil covering Wu Dalang’s face, Mr. He let out a cry, stumbled backward, spat out blood, and collapsed to the floor. His men rushed to help him up. His lips were purple, his face was yellow, his eyes were dim, and the color had drained from under his fingernails.

“He must be possessed by evil spirits!” Mrs. Wang said. “Quick, get some water!”

They fetched the water and splashed some on his face. Slowly, Mr. He came around.

Mrs. Wang told his men to help him home. So they found an extra door and used it as a stretcher to carry him, because apparently everyone keeps at least two backup doors lying around your typical Song dynasty home. When they brought Mr. He back to his home, his family moved him to his bed. His wife

wept and said, "He was fine heading out; how did he end up coming home like this? Who knew he would be possessed by an evil spirit?"

After everyone else had cleared out, she remained by his bedside, sobbing. But just then, he nudged her with his foot and whispered, "Hey, don't worry. I'm fine."

"Just now, I was going to Wu Dalang's home to examine his body," Mr. He explained to his wife. "At the entrance to his street, Ximen Qing, the owner of the medicine shop in front of the county offices, greeted me and asked me to go have a drink with him. He then gave me 10 taels of silver and said, 'When you're examining the body, let a quilt cover it all.' Then, when I got to Wu Dalang's home, I could see his wife didn't look like a good person, so I was already pretty suspicious. Then, when I lifted up the veil, I saw Wu Dalang's face was purple and black, blood was coming out of his orifices, and his lips had teeth marks. He must have been poisoned. I was going to call it out, but then I thought, he has no one here to stand up for him. If I run afoul of Ximen Qing, I would be poking a hornets' nest. I was going to let it go and let them put his body in the coffin, but Wu Dalang has a brother. He's the Constable Wu who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge a while back. He's going to be back sooner or later, and then this thing would surely blow up."

Hearing this, Mr. He's wife said, "I've also heard someone say a couple days ago that the kid Yunge helped Wu Dalang of Purple Stone Lane catch his adulterous wife in the act and caused a ruckus at a teahouse. That must be connected to this. You should question them carefully. It's not hard to deal with this matter. Just send your men to put his body in the coffin and ask his wife how soon she wants to bury him. If she wants to keep him in state at home and wait for Wu Song to come back before holding the burial, then all would seem to be on the level. Even if she wants to bury him right away, that's ok too. But if she wants to cremate him right away, then there must be something fishy. In that case, when the time comes, you can attend the cremation and pretend to be there to see his body off. When no

one's looking, collect a couple pieces of his bones and keep them along with that 10-tael piece of silver from Ximen Qing as evidence. When Wu Song comes back, if he doesn't ask any questions, then you just say nothing. That way, you won't be scraping any skin off Ximen Qing's nose, and we'll eat well on his money."

So once again, notice how even in advising her husband to do the right thing, Mr. He's wife was acting more out of self interest than any sense of morality or ethics. Similarly, the kid Yunge tattled on the adulterers not because he thought their actions were wrong and had to be exposed, but because Mrs. Wang had beat him up and he wanted payback. Everyone in this novel is some shade of gray.

Anyway, back to the story. Upon hearing his wife's advice, Mr. He said, "You're such a good wife and a clever woman." He then summoned his employees and said, I've been possessed and can't go. You guys go put the body in the coffin and ask them when they want to conduct the services, and let me know right away. Whatever money they give you, divide it equally amongst yourselves. If they offer you anything for me, don't accept it."

So his men went off, and they came back and told him, "Wu Dalang's wife said she wants to conduct the funeral in three days and she wants a cremation outside of town."

After his men divided the money and left, Mr. He said to his wife, "It's exactly as you said. When it's time, I'll go steal some bones."

Meanwhile, Pan Jinlian and Mrs. Wang were doing everything they could to maintain their cover. Pan Jinlian stayed up all night, holding vigil for her husband. The next day, they brought in four monks to read scripture and recite prayers. On the morning of the third day, Mr. He's men came to carry the coffin out for cremation. A few neighbors accompanied them. Pan Jinlian donned her mourning garb and pretended to wail for her husband the whole way to the funeral pyre outside of town.

As they prepared to light the fire, they saw Mr. He approaching with a stack of fake paper money, which were typically burned during funeral services. Mrs. Wang and Pan Jinlian greeted him and told him how relieved they were to see him well.

“A few days ago I bought a tray of steamed buns from Wu Dalang and had not paid him yet,” he told them. “So today I’ve come to offer this money to him.”

“How thoughtful and honest you are,” Mrs. Wang said.

Mr. He then burned the fake money and set the coffin ablaze.

“You’re so very kind,” the two women told him. “When we get home, we’ll offer our thanks more properly.”

“I’m just trying to be useful,” he said. “No need to bother with that. Why don’t you go tend to the neighbors waiting in the rest hall, and I’ll take care of things here?”

So the two women went off, and once they were out of sight, Mr. He picked out two pieces of bone from the fire and soaked them in the pool used for dousing cremated remains. They were flaky and black, which were apparently telltale signs of poisoning. Mr. He stashed away the bones and then went to socialize with the neighbors. Once the coffin was consumed by the flames, they put out the fire and doused the remains, and then the neighbors all dispersed.

As soon as he got home, Mr. He put the bones and the silver he got from Ximen Qing in a small satchel, along with a piece of paper bearing the date and the names of the people at the funeral. This he kept in his room.

As for Pan Jinlian, when she got home, she set up an altar, on which stood a tablet that read, “In memory of Wu Dalang, departed husband.” She lit a glass lamp in front of the tablet. Around the room, she hung up pennants with scripture verses, sacrificial paper money and ingots, and funereal ribbons.

That was downstairs. Upstairs, however, was a different story. Up there, Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing got it on every single day. Unlike before, when they were trying to stay on the down low in Mrs. Wang's house, they were now carrying on with no worries inside her own home. And Ximen Qing would just stay there for four or five days in a row, not even bothering to go home at night, much to the annoyance of the women he had at home. The pair was so bold that it got to the point where everyone on the street knew about it, but no one dared to say anything, since nobody wanted to make an enemy of Ximen Qing.

But as the saying goes, "Ecstasy begets tragedy, and from misery springs good fortune." Before you knew it, another 40-some days had passed since Wu Dalang's death. And one day, while Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing were in the throes of passion upstairs, they suddenly heard someone call out from downstairs, "Sister-in-law, it's me, Wu Song."

Oh crap.

So yeah, Wu Song was back in town. Remember he had been sent by the county magistrate to deliver some of the magistrate's wealth to the capital. And unlike a certain other hero who shall remain nameless, Wu Song successfully completed HIS convoy duty. Once he dropped off the goods, he spent a few days checking out the capital and then started his journey home. The round trip took just about two months. It was now the third month of the year on the Chinese calendar, which would make it about April.

As Wu Song was making his way back, something just didn't seem right. He constantly felt unsteady and wanted nothing more than to get home quickly and see his brother. Upon returning to the county, he first went to report to the magistrate, who was delighted and rewarded him with a big hunk of silver and some wine and food. After that, Wu Song went to his quarters to change and then headed to his

brother's home. As he strolled down Purple Stone Lane, every neighbor who saw him was alarmed and secretly sweating and thinking, "Oh boy, here comes trouble. He's not going to let this go. It's all gonna blow up now!"

When he got to his brother's home, Wu Song stepped inside and was immediately greeted by the sight of an altar that said, "In memory of Wu Dalang, departed husband."

Stunned, Wu Song opened his eyes wider and asked himself in disbelief, "Am I seeing things?" And then, he called out for his sister-in-law.

As we mentioned a moment ago, Pan Jinlian was in the midst of another romp with Ximen Qing when she was so rudely interrupted. Ximen Qing was scared witless and immediately made a beeline for the backdoor and slipped away through Mrs. Wang's house. Pan Jinlian, meanwhile, shouted toward the first floor, "Brother-in-law, have a seat. I'll be right there!"

So what was taking her so long to get downstairs? Well, after Wu Dalang died, Pan Jinlian hadn't been bothering with wearing her mourning clothes like a good, chaste widow should. Instead, she was getting dolled up every day for her lover. So now, she had to scramble to wash off her makeup, remove her jewelry, and change out of her red skirt and colorful shirt and into white mourning clothes. All this done, she started fake-sobbing as she headed downstairs.

"Sister-in-law, stop crying for a minute," Wu Song said. "When did my brother die? What did he die of? Whose medicine did he take?"

In between sobs, Pan Jinlian said, "About 20 days after you left, your brother suddenly started getting severe chest pains. He was sick for eight or nine days. We tried everything, from prayer to medicine, and nothing worked. In the end, he died and left me here by myself. Woe is me!"

While this was going on, Mrs. Wang had been eavesdropping from next door. She was worried Pan Jinlian might not be convincing enough, so she rushed over to provide backup.

Wu Song now said, "My brother has never had that kind of ailment. How could he have died from chest pains?"

"Constable, how can you say such a thing?" Mrs. Wang retorted. "Don't you know the saying, 'The weather is unfathomable, and man's fortune can turn in an instant'? Who can guarantee against misfortune?"

Pan Jinlian chimed in and said, "I owe much to Mrs. Wang. I was totally useless. If not for her, who among our neighbors would be willing to come help me?"

"Where is my brother buried?" Wu Song asked.

"I was all alone, so how could I go look for a burial plot? I had no choice but to cremate him after three days."

"How many days has my brother been gone?"

"Two days shy of 49," Pan Jinlian replied, referring to the length of the traditional Buddhist funeral ceremony.

Wu Song pondered in silence for a bit, and then he walked out and headed back to the county offices. He went to his quarters and changed into clean, plain-color clothes. He then told a soldier to make him a hemp rope, which he tied around his waist. He also concealed on his body a thick-backed, sharp-edged knife. He took some silver and went out with a soldier to buy some rice, noodles, and such, as well as candles, incense, and sacrificial money.

As evening descended, Wu Song knocked on Pan Jinlian's door. She opened and let him and his soldier in. Wu Song told the soldier to go make dinner. Meanwhile, he went to the altar, lit the lamp and laid out the wine and various other items. By about 9 p.m., everything was ready.



Dropping to his knees, Wu Song kowtowed to the altar and said, "Brother, I hope your spirit is near. In life, you were weak and timid. And now, your cause of death is unclear. If you died unjustly by someone's hand, then come to me in my dreams, and I will avenge you."

He then sprinkled wine on the ground, burned the sacrificial money, and began to wail. His cries were so loud that it put all the nearby neighbors on edge. Meanwhile, Pan Jinlian joined in with some fake weeping.

After he was done crying, Wu Song and his soldier ate dinner and asked Pan Jinlian for a couple mats. He told the soldier to take one mat and sleep by the door between the inner and outer rooms. He himself plunked down in front of the altar. Pan Jinlian, meanwhile, went upstairs, bolted the door at the top of the stairs, and went to sleep as well.

Deep into the night, Wu Song was still tossing and turning, unable to sleep. He looked over at the soldier he had brought, and that guy was out like a light. Wu Song got up, looked over at the lamp in front of the altar tablet, and saw that it was flickering in and out. Just then, he heard the watch drums signaling that it was now past midnight.

Letting out a sigh, Wu Song sat back down on his mat and said to himself, "My brother was weak and timid in life. How could he be any different in death?"

But before he finished talking, a blast of cold air swirled up from under the altar, chilling him to the bone. The room became dim, the lamp lost its flame, and the paper money on the walls danced wildly.

Wu Song could feel his hair standing up on end from the chill. When he focused his eyes, he saw someone emerge from under the altar. This figure said to him, "Brother, I died a cruel death!"

Wu Song couldn't see this figure clearly and was just about to get closer to ask him questions, but the cold air immediately dissipated, along with the figure. Wu Song fell back onto his mat, wondering if it was real or just a dream. He gazed over at the soldier and saw that he was still sound asleep.

“There must be more to my brother’s death,” he thought to himself. “He was just about to tell me, but my living essence scattered his shade.”

As the sky gradually lightened, the soldier got up and heated water for Wu Song to wash up. Pan Jinlian also came downstairs and asked Wu Song, “Brother-in-law, did you have a restless night?”

“Sister-in-law, what did my brother die of?” Wu Song asked again.

“Did you forget? I told you last night, he died of chest pains.”

“Whose medicine did he take?”

“I’ve got the prescription right here.”

“And who purchased the coffin?”

“Mrs. Wang from next door.”

“And who carried the body out?”

“Mr. He, the local coroner, took care of everything.”

“Ok then. I have to go check in at the county office. And then I’ll be back.”

So Wu Song got up and left with his soldier. When they reached the end of the street, he asked the soldier, “Do you know Mr. He, the coroner?”

“Constable, did you forget? He was among the ones who came to congratulate you when you killed the tiger. He lives on Lion Street.”

“Take me there.”

So the soldier led Wu Song to Mr. He’s home. Wu Song dismissed the soldier and went inside alone, calling out, “Is Mr. He at home?”

Mr. He had just gotten up, and when he heard Wu Song was calling, he was in such a panic that he didn’t even put on his headscarf. He quickly grabbed the satchel with the evidence, stashed it on his body, and came out to greet Wu Song.

“Constable, when did you get back?”

“Just yesterday. I would like to have a word with you. Please come with me.”

“I’ll be right there. Please have some tea first.”

“No need. Let’s go.”

So the two went out to a tavern at the entrance to the street and ordered two horns of wine. Mr. He stood up and said, “I haven’t welcomed you back yet. What brings you to my door?”

“Please sit,” Wu Song said.

Now, Mr. He was pretty sure he knew what Wu Song was doing here, but Wu Song did not say a single word while the waiter poured wine. He just kept drinking. The silence was getting to be unbearable for Mr. He as he was soaked in nervous sweat, so he tried to strike up a conversation, but to no avail.

After a few cups of wine, Wu Song suddenly pulled back his shirt and pulled out a sharp knife and stuck it on the table. The waiters were all stunned and did not dare to come forward. Mr. He’s face turned blue and yellow, and he did not dare to exhale.

Wu Song rolled up his sleeves, took the knife in his hand, pointed at Mr. He and said, “I may be a crude man, but I still understand the principle that ‘Every grievance should be taken up with the culprit, and every debt with the debtor.’ You don’t need to be afraid. Just answer me honestly. Tell me how my brother died, and nothing will happen to you. If I harm you, then I am no hero! But if you so much as utter half a lie, then I will riddle you with holes! Now, cut to the chase. Tell me: What did my brother’s body look like?”

As he finished speaking, Wu Song put his hands on his knees and fixed a fiery gaze that threatened to burn a hole through Mr. He.

Mr. He pulled out a satchel, put it on the table, and said, “Constable, please calm down. This satchel contains key evidence.”

Wu Song opened it and saw a couple pieces of blackened bones and a 10-tael piece of silver.

“How is this key evidence?” he asked.

“I don’t know the backstory,” Mr. He said, “but on the 22nd day of the first month, I was at home when Mrs. Wang from the teahouse came to ask me to go examine Wu Dalang’s body. That day, when I got to Purple Stone Lane, I was greeted by Ximen Qing, the owner of the medicine shop across from the county offices. He stopped me and invited me to go have a bottle of wine with him in a tavern. He gave me this silver and said, ‘When you’re examining the body, let a quilt cover it all.’ I knew he was a knave and that he would not take no for an answer. So I drank the wine and took the silver. When I got to Wu Dalang’s home and looked under his veil, I saw blood in his orifices and teeth marks on his lips. Those are telltale signs of poison. I was going to call it out, but he had no one to stand up for him, and his wife was saying he died from chest pains. So I did not dare to raise the issue. Instead, I bit my tongue and spat blood, pretending to be possessed by an evil spirit so that I could go home and send my men to go take care of the body. I myself have not accepted a single coin. Three days after that, I heard they were taking his body out for cremation, so I bought some sacrificial money and pretended to go offer a sacrifice. When Wu Dalang’s wife and Mrs. Wang weren’t looking, I collected these bones and kept them at home. This bone is flaky and black; those are signs of poison. This piece of paper has the date and the names of those who attended. This is my testimony. You’re welcome to check it.”

“Who is the adulterer?” Wu Song asked.

“I don’t know who it is,” Mr. He said. “I did hear some gossip that Yunge, the kid who sells pears, had helped Wu Dalang catch the adulterers in the act at the teahouse. Everyone on that street knew about it. If you want details, you should ask Yunge.”

“Good. Since we have a witness, then let’s go pay him a visit,” Wu Song said. He then put away the knife, packed up the evidence, paid the bill, and headed toward Yunge’s house with Mr. He.

As they approached the house, they saw the kid returning with a willow basket. He had been out buying rice. Mr. He called out to him, “Yunge, do you recognize this constable?”

“I saw him when they brought the tiger to town,” Yunge said. “What do you guys want with me?”

Now, this kid was a clever boy, so even though he was asking the question, he could already guess the answer, so he quickly followed up and added, “There’s just one thing though. My dad is 60 and has no one else to take care of him. So I can’t get dragged into a court case with you guys.”

Wu Song handed him five taels of silver and said, “Good brother, give this to your father for living expenses, and then come talk with me.”

Yunge thought to himself, “These five taels of silver could last us four or five months. That being the case, I guess it’s ok to go to court with him.”

So he left the silver and the rice with his father and accompanied Wu Song and Mr. He to a restaurant.

So it’s looking like this cold case is about to heat up in a big way. To see how the ancient Chinese justice system will handle this, tune into the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we’ll see how Wu Song handles this when the ancient Chinese justice system invariably does its thing. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!