

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 44.

Last time, Jiang Menshen, his boss Commandant Zhang, and Commandant Zhang's sworn brother General Zhang had conspired to frame Wu Song for theft. The trap worked and Wu Song ended up in jail. Originally, the prefect was pressing for a harsh sentence, but then he found out that he wasn't getting quite as much bribery money as he perhaps should be, so he let up. That, combined with the persistent efforts of the magisterial clerk to go easy on Wu Song, led to a more lenient sentence.

Once the 60-day requisite detention period was over, Wu Song was hauled out of his jail cell and brought into the courthouse. There, they opened the cangue he had been wearing. The clerk read his confession out loud, a confession obtained under torture by the way, and then handed down the sentence. Wu Song was to receive 20 strokes on his back and be exiled to another penal colony, this time in Enzhou (1,1) Prefecture. As for the so-called evidence, aka the gold and silver wares that General Zhang planted in Wu Song's room, those were returned to General Zhang.

So Wu Song received his 20 strokes right then and there, although thanks to some well-placed bribes by his friend Shi En's father, the old warden, and sympathy from the clerk, the men delivering those 20 blows went easy on him. Then they tattooed his face. Remember he already had one tattoo from when he was exiled for killing his brother's murderers, so now he had two. Finally, they put a cangue around his neck that weighed 7 catties, which was a little under 8 pounds, so not too heavy. The necessary paperwork was issued, and two guards were dispatched to escort Wu Song on his exile.

Wu Song swallowed his rage and left the town with the two escorts following behind. After about a third of a mile, Wu Song's friend Shi En suddenly appeared from a tavern on the side of the main road.

"Brother, I've been waiting for you," Shi En said.

Wu Song looked at Shi En and saw that his head was once again bandaged and his arm was once again in a sling. Dude, really? I was indisposed for, what, two months? And here you go again, getting owned.

“I haven’t seen you in awhile. How did you end up like this again?” Wu Song asked.

“To be honest,” Shi En sighed, “after I visited you in prison three times, the prefect found out and started sending men to inspect the jailhouse at random times. And General Zhang also stationed people near the jailhouse to keep watch. So I couldn’t go see you there anymore and could only get updates from the bailiff. Half a month ago, I was tending to business in the tavern at the Pleasure Forest. Jiang Menshen and a group of soldiers came to start a fight. I took another beating from him, and he forced me to apologize to him in front of everyone and then he took over my tavern again. I’ve been laid up at home recovering. I heard that you were setting off for Enzhou (1,1) today, so I came to give you a couple warm tunics for you to wear on the way. I also have two cooked geese here. Please have some before you go.”

Shi En then invited the two escorts to go into the tavern for wine. But they refused and instead said angrily, “This Wu Song is a criminal. If we accept your invitation, then someone is going to use that against us in front of the prefect. Scram, unless you want a beating!”

Shi En thought maybe this was just the guards throwing their weight around to press for palm-greasing, so he took out 10 taels of silver and tried to give it to them, but the guards refused to accept it and just angrily ordered Wu Song to keep moving.

So either these were the two most ethical guards in this entire novel, or something even fishier than the usual cycle of bribery was at play. Either way, Shi En had no choice but to quickly give Wu Song a couple bowls of wine while he strapped a bundle around Wu Song’s waist and hung the two geese on Wu Song’s cangue. As he did so, he whispered to Wu Song, “There are two tunics in the bundle and some loose silver for travel expenses. There are also a couple pairs of hemp sandals in there. Be careful on the way. These two knaves must be up to something.”

Wu Song nodded and said, “No need to remind me; I can tell. Even if there are two more of them, I would not be afraid. Just go home and rest and don’t worry. I’ll be on guard.”

Shi En bowed and wept as he left. Wu Song and his escorts then resumed their journey.

A few miles later, the two escorts started whispering to each other. Wu Song could overhear them saying, "Why haven't we seen those two guys yet?"

Wu Song simply chuckled and thought to himself, "You damn mothers. So you're trying to take me down, huh?" But he didn't care. As he walked, his right hand was locked in his cangue, but his left hand was free. So he started tearing into one of the geese that Shi En gave him and paid the escorts no mind. After another mile or so, he started working on the other goose, holding it with his right hand and tearing it apart with his left as he munched. In less than two miles, he had finished both geese.

By now, they were about three miles outside of town. As they pressed forward, they saw two men up ahead. They each carried a long-handle broadsword and wore a short broadsword around their waist, and they seemed to be just hanging out, waiting. As Wu Song and the two escorts passed them by, however, these two guys fell in behind them and walked alongside the escorts. Well, that's not suspicious at all. Wu Song stole a few peeks and could see the two escorts were giving the other two guys knowing looks. Wu Song had a pretty good idea what was coming, but he just kept going and pretended to not see any of it.

Another mile or so later, they came across a body of water. Now, the term the novel uses for this body of water literally translates to fish pond, which I think really undersells the setting. In the TV adaptations, they've typically depicted this as a deep ravine or roaring river with high, steep banks. I think that's probably more fitting, so I'm going with ravine here.

As they approached a wide wooden plank bridge that stretched across the ravine, they saw a plaque on an arch that said "Flying-Cloud Ravine." Wu Song saw this sign, but he pretended to be clueless and asked his escorts, "What is this place?"

“You’re not blind. Can’t you see the sign by the bridge that says Flying-Cloud Ravine?!” they scoffed.

Wu Song paused and said, “I need to take a piss.”

As he paused, the two mystery travelers crept up behind him, but suddenly, Wu Song shouted, “Down you go!” and his left leg kicked up and caught one of the men, sending him tumbling into the water below. Before the other mystery traveler could even turn and run, Wu Song’s right leg was sailing through the air, and he, too, splashed down into the water.

Seeing the operation go south, the two escorts panicked and tried to run off the bridge, but Wu Song roared, “Stop where you are!”

With one twist, he snapped his cangue into two pieces and chased after the escorts. The two guards were scared stiff and couldn’t move. Wu Song caught up to them and landed a punch in the back of one of the guards, sending him to the ground. Wu Song then picked up one of the broadswords that the mystery travelers had dropped and riddled this guard with holes. Then, he turned around and did the same with the other guard, who was still frozen in fear.

By now, the two mystery travelers, who somewhat miraculously had survived the fall, were struggling to their feet and climbing back onto land beneath the bridge. But they were probably better off drowning in the water, because Wu Song now stomped down there and with one swing, cut down one of the men. He then grabbed the other guy by the head and roared, “Tell me the truth, and I’ll spare your life!”

“We ... we two are Jiang Menshen’s disciples. Our master and Commandant Zhang planned this trap and sent us to help the escorts finish you off here.”

“Where is Jiang Menshen now?”

“When we left he and Commandant Zhang were drinking at the Mandarin Duck Bower in General Zhang’s home. They’re waiting for us to report back.”

“So that’s it. Well then, I can’t spare you!”

And with one swing of the broadsword, Wu Song finished off the last of his assailants. He then picked out a good short broadsword and tossed the two bodies into the water. He came back up on the bridge and put a few more holes in the two guards, just in case they weren't quite dead yet.

Now, in the TV adaptations, this was another one of those scenes that really gets amped up a notch or two to show how ridiculously awesome Wu Song was. Whereas in the novel he merely fought off four guys, that number seemed to grow with every new TV series based on the novel. In the most recent one, I think he killed 10 guys on the bridge.

However many men he killed, Wu Song's blood was now bubbling with rage as he stood on the bridge and thought, "Even though I killed these four crooks, until I kill General Zhang, Commandant Zhang, and Jiang Menshen, how can my hatred be appeased?"

He stood there for a good while, gripping his broadsword, thinking it over and over in his head. He was free; he could just keep going in the other direction and find safety. But after a long while, he made up his mind. He turned and started walking back toward Mengzhou Prefecture.

As dusk descended, the people of Mengzhou were going about their business, closing the doors to their shops and homes. As darkness started to descend, a shadowy figure climbed over the walls and flashed across the back alleys of the town.

At General Zhang's estate, a stablehand was busy feeding the horses in the stable behind the rear garden. Around 8 o'clock, he finished his work and prepared for bed. He had just disrobed and laid down in bed when the door to the stable started to rattle.

"Hey! I just went to bed. If you want to steal my clothes, you could've at least come earlier!" the stablehand shouted at the door half-jokingly.

A second later, the door rattled again, even harder this time.

“Dammit!” the annoyed stablehand yelled as he jumped up, grabbed a wooden staff, and unlatched the door. He was just about to stomp outside and teach whoever was disturbing his sleep a lesson when suddenly, the door flung open and a figure stormed in and grabbed him by the head. Before he knew it, the stablehand felt the cold blade of a broadsword pressed against his throat.

“Spare me, please!” the stablehand pleaded as he trembled.

“Do you recognize me?!” the dark figure asked.

The stablehand indeed recognized the voice. It was none other than Wu Song.

“Brother, I had nothing to do with it. Spare me!” the stablehand begged.

“Then tell me the truth: Where is General Zhang right now?”

“He, he’s been drinking all day with Commandant Zhang and Jiang Menshen. They’re still drinking on the Mandarin Duck Bower.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“If, if I dare to lie, then may I be covered with boils.”

“That may be, but I still can’t spare you!”

Before the stablehand could utter another word, Wu Song’s blade ran across his neck, and a few seconds later, life drained out of his body. Wu Song kicked the corpse aside, sheathed the broadsword, and then untied from his waist the bundle that Shi En had given him earlier that day. He changed out of his old clothes and put on the tunic that Shi En gave him. Then, he strapped the broadsword and scabbard around his waist, wrapped up some loose silver with a bed sheet and tucked it into a bag. Next, he pushed the doors against the wall between the stable and the rear garden. Then he blew out the candles, grabbed the long-handle broadsword that he had left outside, and used the door to start scaling the wall.

Under the faint glow of the moon, Wu Song climbed to the top of the wall and jumped down into the garden. Then he opened a side door that led back to the stables. He went through the door, came

back to the stables and returned the stable doors to their original position so as to cover his tracks. He then went back to the garden and closed the side door, but left it unlatched. He then headed toward a room where the lamp was lit inside.

This turned out to be the kitchen. Inside, two servant girls were sitting by the stove, complaining as they heated a kettle of water.

“We’ve been tending to them all day, and they still aren’t going to bed yet. Instead they want tea. And those two guests are so shameless. They’re already dead drunk but still won’t go rest. Instead they just prattle on and on.”

As they were grumbling, the door to the kitchen suddenly flew open with a creak, and a man wielding a bloody broadsword charged in. Before either servant girl could scream, Wu Song already had one by her hair and ran her through with his broadsword. The other girl wanted to run, but her feet were paralyzed with fear. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out because she was so terrified. Wu Song’s blade came down through the air and in the blink of an eye, both girls laid dead.

So you know how in past episodes Wu Song made a point of noting that he never harmed innocents, only those who had done him wrong? The whole “every debt should be taken up with the debtor” thing? Well, that rule is going out the window tonight. Certainly the escorts and the assassins who tried to ambush him were not innocent, but the stablehand and these two servant girls? Was that really necessary? Well, Wu Song was not in the mood to debate ethics at the moment. He dragged both bodies by the stove and blew out the kitchen lamp. Then, he snuck toward the main hall under the moonlight coming through the windows.

Soon, he recognized where he was going, and he found his way to the Mandarin Duck Bower, where a couple months earlier he had been General Zhang’s guest. Slowly, he tiptoed up the stairs.

By now, all the attendants were sick and tired of their master's daylong party and had slipped far away, leaving General Zhang and his two drunken guests there by themselves as they continued to shoot the breeze. Wu Song stood just below the top of the stairs and listened.

"My lord, thank you for helping me get revenge," he heard Jiang Menshen say. "I will repay you handsomely."

"If not for the sake of my sworn brother Commandant Zhang, who would do such things," General Zhang replied. "Even though it cost you some money, we fixed that bastard good. He's gonna be dead any minute now. I told them to finish him at Cloud-Chasing Ravine. We just need to wait for those four guys to come back tomorrow for the details of how it went down."

"It's four against one; what chance does he have?" Commandant Zhang said. "Even if he had nine lives, he'd be dead."

Jiang Menshen chimed in and added, "I also instructed my disciples to make their move there, and to report back as soon as it's done."

As they went around the table playing this game of exposition, Wu Song could feel a fire raging inside his heart. He gripped the broadsword in his right hand and stomped up the last couple steps. The top floor was lit up by a few bright candles and several beams of moonlight. The table was still covered with wine cups and such.

The sight of Wu Song charging toward them left all three men in shock. Jiang Menshen tried to get out of his chair, but before he could budge, Wu Song's broadsword had slashed him across the face so hard that it sent him and his chair tumbling to the ground. General Zhang had just gotten to his feet at that moment, and Wu Song turned and sliced a gash from his ear down across his throat, sending him crumbling to the floor as well. Seeing his two friends twitching on the ground, Commandant Zhang figured he had no way out, so he grabbed a chair and swung it at Wu Song. But Wu Song easily grabbed



the chair with one hand and gave it a hard push, sending Commandant Zhang stumbling backward. Wu Song then stomped toward him, kicked him to the ground and brought his broadsword down across the commandant's neck, cutting off his head.

By now, Jiang Menshen had struggled to his feet, but he should've just stayed down, because all that earned him was a swift kick from Wu Song's left foot, followed by a flash of the broadsword that severed his head as well. Finally, Wu Song turned around and did the same to General Zhang.

Now covered in blood, Wu Song went, "Oh hey, wine and meat on the table. Cool." He sat down by the table and helped himself to three or four goblets of wine as three headless corpses lay around him. When he was done taking his wine break, he cut off a piece of clothing from one of the bodies, dipped it in blood, walked over to one of the white walls, and wrote eight large characters that said, "The killer was Wu Song the Tiger Slayer." Even now, he wasn't afraid to stand behind his actions.

Then, Wu Song took a few of the more valuable drinking vessels from the table, stomped them flat, and stashed them in his tunic. He was just about to head downstairs when he heard the voice of General Zhang's wife down below.

"All the gentlemen upstairs are passed out drunk. Quick, you two go up there and help them down."

Next thing you know, two guys were rushing up. Wu Song quickly ducked behind the staircase. From the shadows, he could see that these two men were General Zhang's personal attendants and had been among the ones who ambushed him the night he was framed. Well, ain't that convenient?

Wu Song waited in the shadows for the two men to pass him by. The two attendants went into the party room and were greeted by the sight of three headless corpses lying in pools of blood. The two were petrified and stared at each other in silent terror. It was as if someone had split open their skulls and poured in half a bucket of icy snow.

Of course, that might've actually been preferable to what happened next. As the two turned to flee, they were greeted by Wu Song. Before they could react, one of them had already fallen to Wu Song's blade. The other sank to his knees and pleaded for his life.

"I can't spare you!" Wu Song barked as he grabbed the man and cut off his head, too. So add two more headless bodies and a few more puddles of blood to this grisly scene.

"I've come this far, I might as well go all the way," Wu Song said to himself. "Even if I kill 100 of them, they can only kill me once."

Back downstairs, the general's wife was wondering aloud why there was such ruckus upstairs. A second later, she got her answer as she saw a big man stomp into the room she was in.

"Who are you?" she asked. But before she even finished her question, Wu Song's blade fell, and so did she. As she yelped while struggling on the ground, Wu Song pinned her down and raised his broadsword to take her head. But when he ran the blade across her neck, it did not cut. He took a closer look at the broadsword in the pale moonlight and saw that its blade had been wrecked from all the head chopping he had been doing.

"No wonder I couldn't cut off her head," Wu Song said. So he ran back to the side door to retrieve his long-handle broadsword and threw away the dented blade. As he made his way out, he saw three figures approaching. At the head was Yu (4) Lan (2), the singing girl whom the general had supposedly betrothed to him. Behind her were two servant girls.

In the light of the lamp, they saw the body of the general's wife. They had let out but one scream before Wu Song ran Yu Lan through with his blade. And the other two servant girls were dispatched just as quickly. Did they have anything to do with the scheme to frame him? Who knows? Who cares? Wu Song certainly did not. In fact, he was in such a rage that he did not stop there. He now crashed into the hall and went looking for a few more bodies to add to the pile. He came across a few more women, and

stabbed them all in their rooms. Yeah, somewhere along the way this night went from regular vengeance-seeking to indiscriminate, and really indefensible, slaughter.

“NOW I’m satisfied,” Wu Song said to himself, looking at his handiwork. “Now I can go!”

He threw away the scabbard for his short broadsword and took his long broadsword with him. He slipped out of the garden through the side door and went back to the stable to retrieve the bag he had packed earlier. He stuffed the flattened drinking vessels he had taken into the bag, strapped the bag around his waist, and rushed out of the general’s residence.

He made his way to the outer wall of the town and thought to himself, “If I wait until they open the gates, I’d be captured for sure. I should scale the wall tonight.”

So he started climbing. This Mengzhou Prefecture was a small place, so its earthen wall wasn’t all that tall. From the ramparts, Wu Song probed down with the shaft of his broadsword until he found a spot where it touched the ground. Using the broadsword, he pole-vaulted off the wall and landed next to the moat. This moat was only a foot and a half deep, and this being the 10th month of the year, many of the spots were actually dry. So Wu Song took off his socks, shoes, and leg wrappings, pulled up his clothes and waded across the moat. He then remembered that Shi En had also given him a couple pairs of hemp sandals. So he strapped those on.

As he tidied up, he could hear the watch drums inside the town beating to signal that it was now 2 a.m. “At last, I’ve gotten that rage out of my system,” he said. “But this is no place for me to hang around. I have to leave.” So he took his broadsword and took a backroad toward the east.

After walking for about three hours, the sky was still cloaked in darkness. By now, Wu Song was fading fast. Mass murder really takes a lot out of you, and there were also the wounds from the 20 strokes he received before he was exiled. As he staggered along, he saw a small temple in some woods

across the way. He rushed over, went inside, leaned his broadsword against the wall, and laid down, using his bag as a pillow.

Wu Song's eyes had barely closed when suddenly, two long hooks poked in from outside the temple and grabbed hold of him. Before he could react, two men charged in and piled on top of him and tied him up with a rope.

"This guy's got some meat on him. A perfect gift for big brother," the four strangers said to each other as they dragged Wu Song to his feet.

Wu Song was exhausted and in no condition to put up a fight. The four men took his belongings and hustled off, dragging him along like a goat on a leash. As they walked, the men said to each other, "Look at all that blood on this guy. Where did he come from? Was he a bandit who just did some business?"

Wu Song heard what they said but did not make a sound and just followed them. After a mile or so, the men stopped at a thatched hut and pushed him inside through a small door. They lit a lamp and then stripped Wu Song of his clothes and tied him to a column.

Wu Song looked around the hut and saw two human legs hanging over the stove.

"Damn! I stumbled into the hands of professional killers," he thought to himself. "And now I'm going to die here and no one will know. If I had known this would happen, I would've gone and turned myself in at the prefecture. Even if they execute me, at least I would have left a good name."

So is this the end of Wu Song? To find out, tune into the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we find out who these professional killers are. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!