

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 50.

Last time, Song Jiang, Hua Rong, and the chieftains of Clear Winds Mountain repelled an attack by government forces led by the general Qin Ming. Not only that, they actually either killed or captured all of Qin Ming's men, and took Qin Ming himself prisoner as well. Showing their honor, the heroes spared Qin Ming's life. They also told him the real cause for all the kerfuffle that brought him out there in the first place. When Qin Ming found out that the so-called bandit chieftain he was after was actually Song Jiang, he promised to clear everything up with the prefect when he got back.

Of course, Qin Ming himself was facing a rather uncertain fate since he had lost all his troops. But he insisted on going back, so after sleeping off his exhaustion and inebriation overnight, he took his leave of the bandits and rode back toward Qingzhou Prefecture alone.

Around 11 a.m., he was about three miles out from the prefectural seat. He saw a big cloud of dust in the distance, in the direction of the city, and he also did not see a single soul on the road, which was rather odd. Feeling suspicious, Qin Ming rode forward to see what's up.

Now, outside the city lived a few hundred households. But on this morning, when Qin Ming approached the city, he saw that all the houses had been burned to the ground, and amid the rubble laid countless bodies of slain men and women.

Shocked by this sight, Qin Ming galloped to the foot of the city. He saw that the drawbridge was pulled up, and the walls were lined with soldiers, banners, and defensive projectiles. Reining in his horse, he shouted up to the walls, "Lower the drawbridge and let me in!"

A second later, from the city walls arose the sound of drums and battle cries.

"It's me, General Qin! Why aren't you letting me in?!" Qin Ming shouted again.

A moment later, Prefect Murong appeared atop the city wall, and he shouted down, "You damn rebel! Have you no shame? Last night you came here with an army of bandits and slaughtered countless innocent civilians and destroyed all their houses. And now you dare to try to talk your way into the city?!"

The court has never done you wrong. Why did you commit such a dishonorable act?! I've already sent word to the court. When we capture you, we are going to cut you to pieces!"

Uhhh, wait, what now? Qin Ming was dumbfounded and shouted, "My lord, you're mistaken! I lost all my troops and was captured by the bandits. I just now got away, so how could I have come here to attack the city last night?"

"You think I don't recognize your horse, armor, helmet, and weapon?!" the prefect shot back. "Everyone on the city wall recognized that it was you directing the bandits while they were killing and burning. How can you deny it? And even if you really did get captured, then how come not a single one of your 500 men managed to escape to tell us? You must be trying to trick us into opening the gates so you can get your family. But we've already executed them this morning. If you don't believe me, take a look at your wife's head."

As the prefect spoke, his soldiers hoisted the head of Qin Ming's wife on the tip of a spear. This sight infuriated Qin Ming to no end, but he could do nothing but cry that he was framed. But his pleas were answered by a shower of arrows, and he had no choice but to ride away through the still-burning rubble.

As he surveyed the destruction, Qin Ming wished he could die right then and there. After thinking it over for a long while, he slowly rode away, retracing his steps from this morning. He had not gone but a few miles when a group of a couple hundred men appeared from the woods. At their head were none other than Song Jiang, Hua Rong, and the three chieftains from Clear Winds Mountain.

Bowing from his horse, Song Jiang asked, "General, why did you not return to Qingzhou? Where are you going all by yourself?"

"I don't know who it was, but some unconscionable bastard disguised himself as me and laid siege to the city, destroying civilian houses and slaughtering innocents. And it ended up costing my family their lives, and now I have nowhere to go! If I find whoever did this, I'm going to beat him until I smash this mace to smithereens!"

“General, please calm down,” Song Jiang said. “It’s ok. Since you lost your wife, I’ll play matchmaker and find you another. I know a good match, but this is not the place to discuss it. Please come with us back to the fortress.”

Well, it’s not like Qin Ming had a whole lot of options, so he accompanied Song Jiang back to Clear Winds Mountain. No one spoke on the way. Once they were back at the fortress, the lackeys set up a feast in the main hall. The five heroes asked Qin Ming to take the center seat, and once he sat down, all five of them kneeled, which prompted him to quickly kneel as well to return the gesture.

So ... I get the feeling there’s something you’re not telling me.

“General, please forgive us,” Song Jiang said. “Because you steadfastly refused to join us yesterday, I came up with an idea. I had a man who looked like you wear your armor and helmet, ride your horse and wield your mace, and ordered him to lead some bandits to attack Qingzhou Prefecture. The chieftains Yan Shun and Wang Ying also led 50-some men in support, pretending to be you trying to fetch your family. The killing and pillaging were meant to make it so you can’t go back. And now, we must all ask for your forgiveness.”

Uhh, wait. You did WHAT?!!! Now, knowing Qin Ming’s temper, this is where you would expect him to hulk out and start clobbering everything and everyone in sight. But amazingly, he did no such thing. According to the novel, he was indeed pissed, which, yeah, he had every reason to be. In fact, he did entertain thoughts of having it out with Song Jiang and company, but the novel said he swallowed that anger because 1) he realized it was destiny, 2) he was being besieged by courtesy, and 3) he was afraid he won’t be able to take them all on.

So instead, Qin Ming just said, “I appreciate your good intentions in wanting to keep me here, but you went too far and cost my whole family their lives.”

To this, Song Jiang replied, "If we had not done so, would you have given up the thought of going back? Since you lost your wife, I know that Hua Rong has a younger sister who is virtuous and clever. I am willing to sponsor the match and provide all your household furnishings and marry her to you. What do you think?"

Dude, do the words "too soon" mean anything to you? I mean, they just executed the guy's wife THIS MORNING ... because of you! And here you are, telling him to shrug it off and oh hey, here's a good replacement wife. I'll throw in some furniture, and let's call it even. How about it, huh?

Well, you would expect Qin Ming to blow his lid, but again, quite uncharacteristically, he did not. In fact, the novel said that touched by how much respect and admiration his new ... umm ... friends were showing him, Qin Ming was finally convinced to join them wholeheartedly.

So, let's just pause and chew on how farcical this whole thing was. First, while our "heroes," all of whom were supposedly men of honor, were all smiling and telling Qin Ming, "Yeah, of course you can go home," they were busy cooking up a scheme to make sure he could never go home again. Not only that, they didn't even blink at the fact that their scheme involved slaughtering countless innocent civilians, all for the sake of recruiting one man, or that it would lead to the death of that man's entire family. And then, after the deed was done and seconds after confessing that they were responsible, they had the audacity to tell the man they had wronged so horribly that don't sweat it; here's a new wife for you; welcome aboard. And what's even more amazing is the fact that Qin Ming just caved after being angry for like 30 seconds. Why? Because it was "destiny"? I mean, I could maybe see him going along with it just to stay alive for the moment and plot his revenge later. But no, according to the novel, he just turned full brigand right then and there and got with the program. And just so you know, this won't be the last time our heroes engaged in questionable recruiting tactics, or the last time that those questionable tactics actually worked.

So, moving on. Everyone now asked Song Jiang to sit in the center, flanked by Qin Ming and Hua Rong, and then the three chieftains. And they all then drank and celebrated ... umm ... whatever the hell you call what they just did. And then they got down to talking about how to lay siege to Fort Clear Winds, since oh yeah, Hua Rong's family is still back there, including the sister who just got betrothed to Qin Ming, unbeknownst to her. Also at the fort was the wife of the now-deceased commandant Liu Gao, the woman who had repaid Song Jiang's kindness by framing him as a bandit. And the fort was currently under the protection of Huang (2) Xin (4). You know, the mighty officer who was known as the Suppressor of the Three Mountains and who had fought so poorly and fled so readily in the face of an attack by the bandits of just one mountain.

"This is easy," Qin Ming said. "No need for you guys to worry. That Huang Xin reports to me, and I'm also the one who taught him his fighting skills. We're also best friends. Tomorrow I'll go see him and convince him to join us, deliver Commandant Hua's family, and capture Liu Gao's whore so that we can avenge Brother Song. It will be my introductory gift to you. How about it?"

"If you can do that, then we're most fortunate!" Song Jiang said with delight.

The next morning after breakfast, everyone donned their armor and rode out. Qin Ming set out first and rode to the fort.

Now, ever since he fled back to the fort after his prisoners were taken away by bandits, Huang Xin had ordered all the soldiers and civilians to keep a tight watch on their defenses. He did not dare to venture out to seek battle with the bandits. He sent out many scouts, but did not see any reinforcements coming from Qingzhou Prefecture. Then, that morning, his men reported that Qin Ming had arrived alone and was asking to be let in. Huang Xin hurried out to see for himself, and saw that it

was indeed just Qin Ming. So he opened up the gates, lowered the drawbridge, and welcomed Qin Ming inside.

They went to the main hall of the fort. After exchanging greetings, Huang Xin asked Qin Ming what he was doing there. Qin Ming recounted how he had lost his troops in an attack, and then he said, “Song Jiang the Timely Rain is honorable, generous, and a friend to heroes everywhere. Who does not respect him? Right now he’s on Clear Winds Mountain, and I’ve also joined up with them. You have no family, so why don’t you take my advice and go join up as well. It’s better than putting up with crap from some civil official.”

“Benefactor,” Huang Xin said, “since YOU are there, how can I dare to not follow you? But I had not heard anything about Song Jiang being there. Where did he come from?”

Qin Ming laughed and said, “He was that Zhang the Third, the Tiger of Yuncheng that you were escorting the day before. He was afraid that if he revealed his true identity, it would bring up his other legal trouble, so he just said he was Zhang the Third.”

Stamping his foot, Huang Xin lamented, “If I had known that was him, I would’ve released him on the way, too! I was momentarily fooled and only listened to Liu Gao’s words. I almost ended up costing Song Jiang his life.”

Just as they were talking, Huang Xin’s soldiers came and reported that two armies were marching on the fort. So Qin Ming and Huang Xin got on their horses and went out to prepare for battle. But turns out it was all good. One army was led by Song Jiang and Hua Rong, while the other was led by Yan Shun and Wang Ying. They totaled about 300 men.

Huang Xin now ordered his troops to open the gates and welcome them into the fort. Song Jiang had already sent out orders to all the bandits that they were not to harm a single civilian or soldier. But just in case you thought this was going to be a bloodless takeover, don’t worry. The first thing they did was to storm into the auxiliary fort on the south side of town and slaughter the entire family of the former

commandant Liu Gao. All except one person — his wife. Remember that Wang Ying had the hots for this woman, though Wang Ying pretty much had the hots for any woman who drew breath. While his men were busy killing and pillaging, he captured Liu Gao's wife and kept her stashed away for himself. Then, they looted all of Liu Gao's wealth.

Meanwhile, Hua Rong went back to his residence, packed up his valuables and fetched his wife, child, and sister. As for the townspeople who were serving in his household, he sent them all back to their homes. Once they got everything they came for, our heroes left the town and returned to the mountain.

Once back at the bandit stronghold, they welcomed Huang Xin, the newest addition to their ranks, settled Hua Rong's family into quarters, and distributed the loot among the lackeys. Wang Ying, meanwhile, stashed Liu Gao's wife in his own quarters.

"Where is Liu Gao's wife?" asked Yan Shun, the head chieftain.

"This time, you HAVE to give her to me for a wife," Wang Ying said.

"Fine, but call her out here first. I have a question for her," Yan Shun said.

"I also have a question for her," Song Jiang added.

So Wang Ying summoned Liu Gao's wife, and she approached weeping and begging for mercy.

"You whore!" Song Jiang scolded her. "I rescued you and released you out of kindness and because you were the wife of a government official. Why did you repay kindness with evil?! Now that we've captured you, what do you have to say for yourself?!"

Yan Shun leaped to his feet and said, "What's the point of asking a whore like her?" And as he spoke, he pulled out his knife and with one swing, cut the woman in half.

Seeing his wife-to-be split into two right in front of him, Wang Ying flew into a rage and grabbed a broadsword and was about to have it out with Yan Shun. But Song Jiang stopped him and said, "Yan Shun was right to kill that woman. Brother, look at all that I did to save her life and send her back home

to reunite with her husband. And yet she turned around and instructed her husband to harm me. If you kept her around, it will only bring you harm. I will find you a good woman for a wife, one that will satisfy you.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” Yan Shun chimed in. “There’s nothing to be gained by keeping her around, and in the long run she will no doubt do you harm.”

With everyone siding against him, Wang Ying had no choice but to swallow his grudge. Qin Ming was probably like, yeah, welcome to the club, buddy. Now you know how it feels. Meanwhile, Yan Shun ordered his lackeys to clean up the bloody mess and prepare a feast.

The next day, with Song Jiang and Huang Xin serving as sponsors, and the chieftains Wang Ying and Zheng (4) Tianshou (1,4) playing the role of matchmakers, Hua Rong’s sister was married to Qin Ming, and Song Jiang and Yan Shun prepared all the presents. I can only imagine how they broke the news to the bride. Hey sis, funny story. You know that ill-tempered general over there? Well, we concocted a scheme that got his last wife beheaded, so we kind of owe him a wife. Hey, you’re about marrying age. How would you like to have a mighty warrior for a husband? Sure he’s not known as Fiery Thunderbolt for nothing, and he might still be working out some emotional issues since it was just like two days ago that he saw his wife’s head hanging from the city wall. But I’m sure that’s nothing you lovebirds can’t work out. Anyway I’m glad you have no objections. Here put this veil on. The wedding is like, right now.

So the wedding celebration went on for about five days. Another five or six days after that, scouts came back and said, “Prefect Murong of Qingzhou Prefecture sent word to the Council of Administration that Hua Rong, Qin Ming, and Huang Xin have rebelled, and they are planning to mobilize a huge army to come cleanse Clear Winds Mountain.”



Hearing this, the heroes gathered to discuss their next moves. "This is a small fortress," they said to each other. "It's no place to linger. How would we face the enemy if they come in force and surround the mountain?"

Song Jiang now said, "I have an idea. See what you think. To the south of here, there is a place called Liangshan Marsh. It encompasses 200-some miles and has a fortress and lowlands in the center. Chao Gai, the Heavenly King, has assembled about 5,000 men there, defending the marsh. The authorities do not dare to encroach on them. Why don't we take our men and go join up?"

"That sounds like a perfect place," Qin Ming said. "But without someone to make the introduction, how could they be willing to take us in?"

Song Jiang laughed out loud and recounted how he had saved Chao Gai's skin and how that led to his being on the lam in the first place.

"Since you are their savior, then let's not delay. Let's go at once!" Qin Ming said.

So they prepared a dozen or so carts and loaded all their families and possessions onto them. They also took along about 300 fine horses. As for the bandit lackeys, those who were not willing to go were given some money and dismissed so they can find another master. The ones who were willing to go were combined with the soldiers that Qin Ming had brought with him, forming a force of about 500 men. Song Jiang instructed them to divide up into three armies and disguise themselves as government troops on their way to attack Liangshan.

Once everything was ready, they burned the fortress to the ground and set out. Song Jiang and Hua Rong led the way with about 50 men and horses, a few carts, and the families. Qin Ming and Huang Xin followed with about 90 horses and the carts carrying supplies. Bringing up the rear were the three chieftains with 50 horses. Along the way, the banners that declared they were government troops going

to apprehend the outlaws of Liangshan worked like a charm, as no one dared to stop them. After five or six days of travel, they had left Qingzhou Prefecture far behind.

At the front of the convoy were Song Jiang and Hua Rong, traveling with the families and staying about six or seven miles ahead of the rest of the troops. In front of them lay a place called Reflections Peaks. It was a spot with two tall peaks that looked similar and were situated on opposite sides of the major thoroughfare. As Song Jiang and Hua Rong were riding along, they heard the sound of drums and gongs up ahead.

“There must be bandits there,” Hua Rong said as he prepared his bow and arrow and told a rider to go back and summon the troops. Meanwhile, the main party paused while Song Jiang and Hua Rong went on ahead with 20-some riders to scout out the situation.

A little ways down the road, they saw a squad of about 100 men huddled around a young warrior. He wore a three-pointed headdress, a cloak with flower patterns, brocade robes, and a strand of red agate. He rode a rouge-color horse and wielded a halberd that was painted red. And all his men were dressed in red and holding red banners.

This warrior with a fondness for red sat atop his horse at the foot of one of the peaks, gripped his halberd, and shouted, “Today we’re going to settle this!”

Just then, across the road, another squad of about 100 men appeared from the opposite peak, and they too followed a young warrior. This guy was clad in white from head to toe, and he also wore a three-pointed headdress. He rode a white horse and wielded a silver halberd, and his men were -- you guessed it -- all clad in white and holding white banners.

As the banners waved and the drums rolled on both sides, the two warriors didn’t even bother trading words. Instead, they galloped toward each other and traded blows with their halberds, while

Song Jiang and Hua Rong looked on. The two warriors were quite evenly matched, and neither had the upper hand after 30-some bouts. Both Hua Rong and Song Jiang were so impressed by their skills that they couldn't help but shout their approval.

As he looked on, Hua Rong went forward and got a closer look at the two combatants. Each warrior had something dangling from the tip of his halberd. One had a spotted leopard tail, while the other had a string of gold coins. In the heat of their battle, these two decorative items became entangled, and the two warriors could not pull their own halberd back.

Seeing this, Hua Rong reined in his horse, pulled out his bow and arrow, took aim, and let fly a shot. As his arrow whistled past, it struck the knot and split it in half, separating the two halberds and drawing a round of cheers from the 200-some men from both sides who were watching their leaders go at it.

Mr. White and Mr. Red now both stopped fighting and rode over to Song Jiang and Hua Rong, greeted them, and said, "Who is this miraculous archer?"

Hua Rong replied, "This sworn brother of mine is Song Jiang, the Timely Rain, the magisterial clerk from Yuncheng County. I am Hua Rong, the commandant of Fort Clear Winds."

When they heard that, Mr. White and Mr. Red immediately dismounted and fell to their knees, saying, "We have long heard of your name."

Song Jiang and Hua Rong also dismounted and helped the two warriors to their feet and asked them for their names.

Mr. Red said, "My name is Lü (3) Fang (1). I've modeled myself after Lü (3) Bu (4). So I learned how to wield this halberd, and everyone calls me the "Little Marquis of Wen (1)."

Ok, quick pause here for some context about Lü Bu, the guy that this Lü Fang said was his role model. Lü Bu is a historical figure who lived in the second century, so almost a thousand years before the time of our novel. He lived during the end of the Han dynasty, which was a time of immense chaos

and warfare, and Lü Bu was reputed to be one of the greatest warriors of the era, and in fact, in all Chinese history. He wielded a halberd and his martial prowess is legendary, which is certainly something worth emulating. But on the flip side, Lü Bu also was reputed to have had a propensity to betray those who trusted him. In fact, in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which gives a fictionalized account of the era, he is said to have betrayed and killed not one, but TWO men who adopted him as a son. So, maybe fashioning yourself after his example is a questionable decision. Anyway, as for Lü Fang's nickname, the Little Marquis of Wen (1). The Marquis of Wen (1) was one of Lü Bu's titles and he's often referred to as just the Marquis of Wen (1). So Lü Fang's nickname basically meant Little Lü Bu. And by the way, if you want to learn more about Lü Bu the man and the legend, check out my other show, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.

Anyway, Lü Fang now continued, "I came to Shandong Province to sell medicine, but the business went under and I didn't have enough money to go home, so I occupied these Reflection Peaks and started robbing and pillaging. Recently, that man came here and wanted to take my stronghold from me. I offered to let him have one of the peaks, but he refused, so every day we've been fighting. I never expected that fate would let me meet you."

Song Jiang now turned to Mr. White and asked for his name, and he said, "My name is Guo (1) Sheng (4). I'm a mercury trader. My boat capsized in the Yellow River and I couldn't go home. I originally learned how to wield the halberd from Major Zhang in Jialing (1,2) County and became really good at it, so everyone called me the Second Rengui (2,4)."

Ok, so this Guo Sheng's nickname is also based on a historical figure, Xue (1) Rengui (2,4). He was a famous general from the early years of the Tang Dynasty in the mid 600s, so about five hundred years before the time of the novel. And this Xue (1) Rengui's (2,4) weapon of choice was -- you guessed it -- a halberd.

Guo Sheng now continued, “I heard on the jianghu scene that some guy who wields a halberd was occupying these peaks and robbing and pillaging, so I came here to see who’s better. We’ve been fighting for more than a dozen days and haven’t settled it yet. It’s heaven-sent that I got to meet the two of you today.”

To see how the halberd twins will settle their differences, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang runs into a bearer of bad news. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!