

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 51.

Last time, Song Jiang and his bandit friends from Clear Winds Mountain had decided to ditch their humble abode and go join up with the outlaws on Liangshan. Along the way, Song Jiang and Hua Rong came upon a couple warriors who were mirror images of each other in their fighting skills, demeanor, and weapon of choice. They even had nicknames with parallel structures. And just to hammer home the point, they each occupied a mountain at a place called Reflections Peaks. But instead of being bosom buddies who celebrated their commonalities, they were archrivals obsessing over their differences, namely their difference of opinion on who should control that turf.

When Song Jiang and Hua Rong found them, these two warriors had been fighting for days. But when Song Jiang introduced himself, the two nemesis -- Lü Fang and Guo Sheng -- instantly became united by their common admiration for Mr. Timely Rain. They took turns inviting Song Jiang and his whole entourage to feast on their respective peaks each day. During the banquets, Song Jiang told them, "Hey why don't you guys come with us to Liangshan?" And they were like, hell yeah! So they packed up and joined the gang.

But before the whole group set out again, Song Jiang said, "Hold on. We can't go to Liangshan like this. We have almost 500 troops. Liangshan has eyes and ears everywhere. If they think we're government forces going to pacify them, it's gonna be trouble. Let me and Yan (4) Shun (4) go on ahead to let them know, and the rest of you follow behind. We'll continue to travel in three groups."

Everybody agreed, and it was decided that Song Jiang and Yan Shun, the former head chieftain of Clear Winds Mountain, would take a half day's head start. So the two of them each took a horse, along with about a dozen men, and set out ahead of the main group.

Soon, two days passed, and it was approaching noon on the third day. As Song Jiang and Yan Shun rode, they noticed a big tavern on the side of the main thoroughfare.

"Our men are tired from walking, let's let them buy some wine first," Song Jiang said.

So they stopped and went inside the tavern. There were three large tables and a few smaller ones. One of the large tables was occupied by a single patron. This guy was about 6 feet tall and had a clean-shaven face with a yellow complexion, prominent cheekbones, and bright eyes. He wore a headscarf that was tied in a knot like a pig snout, with expensive circlets of twisted bronze thread hanging down behind. He wore a black silk tunic and had a white girdle around his waist. His legs were wrapped in knee-length stockings, and he wore hemp sandals. Next to him laid a short wooden staff, and on the far side of the table sat his bundle.

Song Jiang said to the waiter, "We have a large party. Can you ask that gentleman to let us have the big table?"

"I'll take care of it," the waiter said.

Song Jiang and Yan Shun then found a place to sit down for now and told the waiter, "Bring us wine. Let each of our men have three big bowls first, and some meat if you have any. Then come pour us some wine."

Seeing that everyone else in Song Jiang's party was standing, the waiter went over to the big table. The patron there looked like some kind of police officer, so the waiter said to him, "Sir, may I please trouble you to switch to another table so that those two government officials' traveling party can have a place to sit?"

But that man was quite testy and barked back, "It's first come first serve! Who cares about some government official's traveling party? I'm not switching!"

Hearing this, Yan Shun muttered to Song Jiang, "Look at how rude he is."

"Let him be," Song Jiang replied as he held Yan Shun back. "Don't sink to his level."

But the man heard this exchange, and he turned and glared at Song Jiang and Yan Shun and scoffed. The waiter now said, "Sir, please help me out. What's the big deal about switching?"

But the guy now got pissed, and he smacked the table and scowled, "You asshole! You must be blind! Of all the people in here, how dare you pick on me and only ask me to move? Even if it were the emperor, I would say no. Keep yammering, and you'll get a taste of my fist!"

"Sir, what did I say?" the waiter protested indignantly.

"Yeah, like you would dare to say anything!" the man snarled.

Finally, Yan Shun had heard enough. He jumped up and said, "You there! If you don't want to switch tables, fine! But leave him alone."

Those sounded like fighting words, and the man responded accordingly. He leaped to his feet, grabbed his short staff, and said to Yan Shun, "What's it to you how I curse him?! There are only two men in this world that I respect. Everyone else is just mud under my feet."

Yan Shun didn't like that, and he picked up a bench and was about to have it out with the guy. But Song Jiang quickly stepped between them and said to the guy, "Don't make a scene yet. First let me ask you: Who are the two men in this world that you respect?"

"If I told you, you would be awe-stricken."

"What are those two heros' names?" Song Jiang asked again.

"One of them lives in Cangzhou (1,1) Prefecture and is the descendant of the last emperor of the previous dynasty. He is Lord Chai Jin, known as the Little Whirlwind."

Song Jiang nodded slightly and asked, "Who's the other one?"

"This one is an amazing man, too. He is Song Jiang, the Timely Rain, the magisterial clerk at Yuncheng County."

At this point, Song Jiang couldn't help but look over at Yan Shun and smirk, and Yan Shun had already put down the bench he was wielding.

"Aside from those two men, I am not afraid of anyone, not even the emperor," the man boasted.

“Hold on,” Song Jiang interrupted him. “I actually know both of those men you mentioned. Where did you meet them?”

“Well, since you know them, then I won’t lie. Three years ago I stayed at Lord Chai’s manor for about 4 months, but I haven’t met Song Jiang yet.”

“Do you want to meet him?”

“I’m on my way to look for him now.”

“Who asked you to look for him?”

“His brother, Song Qing, asked me to deliver a letter to him.”

When he heard that, Song Jiang was delighted. He took the man by the arm and said, “With destiny, men come together from a thousand miles apart. Without it, they pass each other by. I am none other than Song Jiang.”

The man studied his appearance for a moment, and then quickly fell to his knees and bowed, saying, “It’s heaven-sent that I ran into you, brother! I almost missed you and would’ve gone to Old Squire Kong’s place for nothing.”

Song Jiang asked him, “Is my family ok?”

“Brother, hear me,” the man said. “My name is Shi (2) Yong (3). I am from Daming (4,2) Prefecture and made my living as a gambler. People in my home village gave me the nickname the Stone General. I once killed a man in a gambling house with one punch, so I fled and hid at Lord Chai’s estate. I often heard people from the jianghu scene sing your praise, so I went to Yuncheng County to see you. But then I heard that you were traveling for business. So I met with your brother Song Qing. When he heard me mention Lord Chai, he told me that you were staying at Old Squire Kong’s manor on White Tiger Mountain. Because I wanted to make your acquaintance, your brother wrote this letter and asked me to take it to Old Squire Kong’s estate and ask you to hurry home.”

When he heard that last part, Song Jiang got a bit suspicious.

“How many days did you stay at my family’s estate? Did you see my father?” he asked Shi Yong.

“I was only there for one night before leaving. I did not see the old squire.”

Song Jiang now recounted the last few episodes of the podcast for Shi Yong, bringing him up to speed on where they were headed. Shi Yong was delighted.

“Ever since I left Lord Chai’s estate, I have heard how generous and honorable you are,” he said.

“Brother, since you are going to join up at Liangshan, please take me with you.”

“That goes without saying,” Song Jiang told him. “What’s one more person?”

Song Jiang then introduced Shi Yong to Yan Shun and asked the waiter to bring three cups of wine to celebrate the occasion. After the wine, Shi Yong hurriedly took out the letter for Song Jiang and handed it to him. As he took it, Song Jiang noticed something odd: The envelope was sealed the opposite way, and it was not inscribed with the usual “All’s well” on the outside. Song Jiang was now feeling even more anxious, so he quickly tore open the envelope and read the letter. It said:

“Our father passed away from illness at the start of the first month of this year. He is in state at home, waiting for you to come home to bury him. Please, please, do not delay! In sorrow, your brother Song Qing.”

When he finished reading the brief message, Song Jiang started wailing loudly and beating his chest, cursing himself, “What an unfilial son I am! I have misbehaved so! My father is dead and I could not be there to fulfill my duties. How am I any different from an animal?!”

As he cried, he started banging his head against the wall. Yan Shun and Shi Yong quickly got a hold of him, but Song Jiang wept so hard that he passed out and did not come around for a good while.

“Brother, please restrain yourself,” his two companions told him.

Song Jiang now said to Yan Shun, "It's not that I don't care about you guys, but my father was my only lingering concern, and now he's dead. I have no choice but to rush home. You guys go on ahead to Liangshan without me."

Yan Shun tried to console him, saying, "Brother, since the old squire has already passed, even when you get home, you won't be able to see him. All parents must die eventually. Please take a long view of things. Lead us to Liangshan first; then I will accompany you home for the funeral. As the old saying goes, 'A headless snake cannot move.' If you don't come with us, how would Liangshan be willing to take us in?"

But Song Jiang refused. "If I go with you, it's going to cost me quite a few days. That won't do. I'll write an introduction letter and explain everything, and you guys take Shi Yong with you to go join up. It's one thing if I never found out about my father. But now that I know, I am dying to get home. I don't need any horses or men. I'll rush home by myself tonight."

Yan Shun and Shi Yong tried some more to convince Song Jiang to change his mind, but he steadfastly refused. Instead, he asked the waiter for a roll of paper, ink brush and inkstone. In between sobs, he wrote a letter to his friends on Liangshan, imploring them time and again to accept the group he's sending their way. Once finished, he did not seal the envelope and just handed it to Yan Shun. He borrowed Shi Yong's hemp sandals, took some silver, hung a short broadsword from his waist, and took Shi Yong's short staff. He then started to walk out, nevermind the food and wine.

"Brother," Yan Shun said, "at least wait until General Qin Ming and Commandant Hua Rong get here. You can tell them what happened and then leave."

"I can't wait that long. You have my letter, so everything should be fine. And Brother Shi here can explain in detail. Please relay my apologies to our brothers. Tell them to forgive me on account of my rush to get home for the funeral."

And with that, Song Jiang rushed off, quickly disappearing down the road back toward Yuncheng County.

After Song Jiang had left, Yan Shun and Shi Yong ate and drank a little bit at the tavern and then resumed their journey. After another mile or so, they found an inn for the night. The next morning, the rest of the group caught up, and Yan Shun and Shi Yong told them where Song Jiang had gone off to. Everybody nagged Yan Shun for not keeping Song Jiang here, but Shi Yong told them, "Once he found out his father had died, he wished he himself were dead. He couldn't get home fast enough; how could we keep him? He left this introduction letter and told us to go on, and that the letter should take care of everything."

After reading Song Jiang's letter, Hua Rong and Qin Ming said to everyone, "At this point, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. We can't go back, but we also can't break up. Let's just keep going, present the letter, and see what Liangshan will do. If they don't take us in, then we'll think of something else."

So the nine heroes now traveled as one group totaling about 500. As they approached the marsh around Liangshan, they started looking for a road up the mountain. As they passed through some reeds, they suddenly heard the sound of gongs and drums echoing across the water. They looked up and saw the hillside covered with banners. From the dense reeds two boats darted out, each carrying about 50 bandit lackeys. On the boat in front sat a chieftain, Lin Chong the Panther Head. On the boat in the back was another chieftain, Liu Tang the Red Haired Devil.

Standing on his boat, Lin Chong shouted to the group on land, "Who are you?! Are you government forces? How dare you come to apprehend us? We'll kill every last one of you so you'll know our name!"

Hua Rong, Qin Ming and company all dismounted, stood on the bank, and replied, "We are not government troops. We have an introduction letter from Brother Song Jiang, recommending us to join your stronghold."

"Ah, since you have a letter from Brother Song, then please go ahead to Zhu Gui's tavern," Lin Chong told them. "We will read the letter there and then proceed."

Then, with one wave of a blue flag, a small boat appeared from the reeds, carrying three fishermen. One of them stayed in the boat, while the other two came ashore and said, "Generals, please come with us." Meanwhile, the two reconnaissance boats disappeared at the wave of a white flag and the sound of a gong.

As they watched this, everyone on shore was stunned and said to each other, "How would the authorities dare to encroach on a place like this? Our old fortress cannot compare to this."

Next, they followed the two fishermen to the tavern run by Zhu Gui, the Dryland Crocodile. When Zhu Gui got word of what's going on, he came out to greet them and ordered his men to slaughter two oxens for the visitors. He also read the letter from Song Jiang and then fired a whistling arrow into the reeds on the opposite bank, signaling for a boat. When the boat came, he sent a message to the stronghold on the mountain. Meanwhile, he prepared a feast for the nine heroes, while their troops were stationed around the tavern.

The next morning, Liangshan's military strategist, Wu Yong the Resourceful Star, came to the tavern to welcome the guests, followed by about 30 large boats. Wu Yong and Zhu Gui asked the heroes and their entourage to board the boats, and they rowed over to Golden Sand Beach. Once they disembarked, they walked up a path lined by pine trees, and were greeted by the leader Chao Gai and other chieftains, who were waiting with a band playing in the back. Basically, Liangshan was rolling out the red carpet.



Once they made their way through the mountain passes and into the stronghold, they went to the Hall of Honor and took their seats. All the chieftains of Liangshan sat along the left side. There were 12 of them in all. Bringing up the rear was a new addition, Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat. Remember that Bai Sheng was the wine peddler in Chao Gai's scheme to hijack the birthday convoy. He was later arrested and squealed. Nonetheless, Chao Gai wanted to rescue him, so a few months ago, he arranged a jailbreak for Bai Sheng and brought him to Liangshan.

On the right side of the hall sat the nine newcomers, led by Hua Rong the archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains, then the three chieftains from Clear Winds Mountain -- Yan Shun, Wang Ying, and Zheng (4) Tianshou (1,4), followed by the halberd twins Lü Fang and Guo Sheng, with Shi Yong the Stone General bringing up the rear.

Once everyone took their seats, incense was lit in the center of the hall, and everybody swore an oath of brotherhood. Then, they got down to partying. And the newcomers' soldiers were summoned to come pay their respects to their new leader, and then they also got down to partying, with the other bandit lackeys. Meanwhile, the newcomers' families were settled in quarters on the backside of the mountain.

During the feast, Hua Rong and Qin Ming sang Song Jiang's praises and recounted all their exploits back on Clear Winds Mountain, which delighted everyone. Then, they talked about how Hua Rong's miraculous shot broke up the duel between Lü Fang and Guo Sheng. But when they got to that part, Chao Gai was a little skeptical, so he just muttered something to the effect of, "Oh wow, really? I have to see that for myself sometime."

After they had been partying for a while, the chieftains decided to go take a tour of the mountain and then come back to party some more. So everyone started walking along the mountain paths,

checking out the scenery. When they arrived at the third mountain pass, they heard the calls of wild geese flying overhead, and that gave Hua Rong an idea.

“Just now Chao Gai acted like he didn’t believe how good an archer I am,” he thought to himself. “Why don’t I use this opportunity to show off a little bit, so that they will respect me in the future.”

He glanced around and saw that a number of people were carrying bows and arrows, so he borrowed a bow, and it turned out to be a good one. He took an arrow in hand and said to Chao Gai, “Brother, just now, when we were talking about my archery skills, it seemed like some of the chieftains didn’t really believe us. Right now there is a flock of geese approaching from the distance. I dare not brag, but watch me hit the head of the third goose with this shot. If I miss, please don’t laugh.”

Then, he loaded his arrow, pulled back the bowstring, took aim, and let loose. With a twang of the bow, the arrow darted skyward, and a split second later, the third goose in the flock plunged into the hillside. A soldier fetched it, and sure enough, the arrow had pierced the poor goose’s head.

Chao Gai and all the other chieftains were astonished and praised Hua Rong as a miraculous marksman. In fact, Wu Yong, the Resourceful Star, declared, “None of the great archers of antiquity could match him. How fortunate we are to have him with us.”

And from that day forth, everyone on Liangshan respected Hua Rong. I hope the poor goose can at least take some solace in that.

After more partying, everyone turned in for the night. The next day, another feast commenced, and they started working out the new pecking order. So the first four chieftains remained Chao Gai the leader, Wu Yong the military strategist, Gongsun Sheng the Daoist priest and co-strategist, and Lin Chong the Panther Head. Next came Hua Rong. By rank and age, he should’ve been behind Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, but because Qin Ming had married his younger sister, Hua Rong now leapfrogged him as the No. 5 chieftain, and Qin Ming was No. 6. Next came Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil, followed by

another newcomer, Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains. No. 9 through 11 were filled by the three Ruan brothers who came to Liangshan with Chao Gai. They were followed by a bunch of newcomers: Yan Shun, Wang Ying, Lü Fang, Guo Sheng, Zheng Tianshou, and Shi Yong. Getting bumped farther to the rear were the three original chieftains of Liangshan -- Du Qian, Song Wan, and Zhu Gui -- followed at the end by Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat.

There were now 21 chieftains in all. And spoiler alert, they are far from being done adding to their ranks. The novel loves listing names like I just did, but I'm going to keep that to a minimum because this is gonna get awfully unwieldy, awfully fast.

Now that everyone had their new spot, they partied some more and then got back to making houses, equipment, weapons, armor, banners, and such, in preparation for the next showdown with the authorities.

We'll leave the Liangshan bandits for now and go catch up with Song Jiang. After he left the tavern that day, he traveled through the night. Around 5 p.m. the next day, he arrived at the entrance to his family's village. There, he stopped to catch his breath at the tavern owned by a Ward Chief Zhang.

This ward chief was good friends with Song Jiang's family, and when he noticed Song Jiang looking unhappy and wiping away tears, he asked, "Sir, you haven't been home in half a year. It's great that you're back. Why do you look so unhappy? What's bothering you? A general amnesty has been declared, so your offense surely has been reduced."

"Sir, you're right about the amnesty, but that's not important right now. My father has passed away. How can I not be sad?"

But Ward Chief Zhang burst out laughing and said, "You're such a joker! Your father was just here, drinking with me. He only left an hour ago. Why are you saying such things?"

“Sir, stop poking fun at me,” Song Jiang said as he showed the ward chief the letter from his brother. “My brother Song Qing was quite clear in the letter: My father died at the start of the first month, and they’re waiting for my return to bury him.”

“Bullcrap!” the ward chief scoffed. “That’s nonsense! He was here around lunch time, drinking with Old Squire Wang from East Village. Why would I lie?”

When he heard that, Song Jiang grew even more suspicious and confounded. He contemplated the matter until it was dark out, and then he took his leave of the ward chief and hurried home.

When he entered his family’s estate, there was no commotion. The workhands who saw him all came to greet him.

“How are my father and brother?” he asked them.

“The old squire pines for you every day,” they told him. “He’s going to be thrilled that you’re back. He was drinking with ward chief Wang of East Village at Ward Chief Zhang’s tavern earlier and came back not long ago. He’s asleep now.”

Song Jiang was stunned. He dropped his short staff and rushed into the thatched parlor, where he ran smack dab into his younger brother Song Qing. When he saw Song Jiang, Song Qing quickly bowed to welcome him. Song Jiang saw that his brother was not wearing any mourning clothes, and he flew into a rage. He pointed at Song Qing and scolded him, “You senseless beast! What is this?! Our father is alive and well, so why did you write that letter and lie to me? I almost killed myself and cried until I passed out! You unfilial son!”

Song Qing was just about to explain when Old Squire Song appeared from behind a screen and called out, “My son, don’t be angry. It’s not your brother’s fault. I missed you and wanted to see you, so I instructed him to write that letter saying I was dead to get you to hurry home. I also heard people say that there are lots of bandits around White Tiger Mountain, so I was afraid you might be tricked into joining them and become a disloyal and unfilial man. So I rushed that letter to get you home. When Shi

Yong came here, I asked him to deliver the letter to you. This is all my idea; it has nothing to do with your brother. Don't blame him. I just came back from Ward Chief Zhang's tavern and then I heard you coming in."

After hearing this, Song Jiang knelt and kowtowed to his father, his mind filled equally by worry and joy. He then asked his father, "What's new with my case? There's an amnesty, so my offense must have been reduced. Ward Chief Zhang said that as well."

The old squire told him, "Before your brother came back, thanks to the constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng, they only issued a decree for your arrest and did not come back to bother us anymore. Why do you think I called you back? I heard recently that the emperor named his heir and declared an amnesty to celebrate the occasion. All major offenses are thereby reduced one level and it's already being implemented. Even if you end up in court, you will only be sentenced to exile, not death. So let them do what they will, and we'll find some way to cope."

"Have Constable Zhu and Constable Lei been by?" Song Jiang asked.

His brother Song Qing replied, "I heard a couple days ago that they were both sent away on business. Zhu Tong went to Daming (4,2) Prefecture, and we don't know where Lei Heng went. Right now, there are two new constables named Zhao (4) working at the county office."

The old squire then told Song Jiang to go get some rest, and the whole family was delighted about their reunion.

Around 7 o'clock that night, everyone at the house was asleep. Suddenly, loud cries rose up from outside both the front and back doors, accompanied by countless torches as men surrounded the estate, shouting, "Don't let Song Jiang get away!"

Ah crap.

To see who these men were and what will happen to Song Jiang, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we take another road trip, this time to a land of fish and rice. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!