

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 54.

Last time, Song Jiang and his two guards narrowly escaped becoming soylent green in a black tavern and ended up befriending that tavern keeper and his gang of smuggler buddies. Then, farther down the road, they unknowingly ran afoul of some local bullies and found themselves fleeing said bullies at night. Fortunately, they found a boat to ferry them across the Sundown River, leaving their pursuers behind. Unfortunately, the boat stopped in the middle of the river, and the boatman, a guy who called himself Zhang, demanded that they either submit themselves to his blade or drown themselves in the roaring river. Song Jiang begged and pleaded, offering to give the guy all their money and clothes, but the guy was like, “Well, I’m going to get all that anyway. So hurry up and get naked and jump into the water already.”

Things were not looking good. Caught between death by stabbing or death by drowning, Song Jiang and his guards picked the latter. Clutching each other, they were just about to jump when suddenly, they heard the sound of water splashing. They turned and saw another boat speeding toward them from upriver. In the boat stood three men. One of them stood at the head of the boat with a pitchfork in hand, while the other two were in the back, rowing hard. Before you knew it, they were near Song Jiang’s boat.

“Who is that boatman over there?” the man at the head of the oncoming boat shouted. “How dare you conduct business in this channel? Whoever sees your merchandise gets a share!”

Boatman Zhang looked and quickly answered, “Oh it’s you, Brother Li (3)! I was wondering who it was. You’re off to do business again? Why didn’t you cut me in for a share?”

“Ah Brother Zhang, you’re up to your old tricks again I see,” the man in the oncoming boat said. “What merchandise do you have in your boat? Is it a good deal?”

“If I told you, you would laugh at me,” Boatman Zhang replied. “I haven’t had business in days, and I lost my last coin at the gambling house. I was just sitting around bored on the beach when a group of

men chased these three pieces of merchandise right into my boat. Turns out it's two guards and a short, dark prisoner. I don't know who the hell they are. He said he's being exiled to Jiangzhou, but he's not wearing his cangue. Turns out they were being chased by the Mu (4) brothers. Those brothers insisted on having these three, but I saw that they were loaded with silver, so I didn't return them."

"Wait!" the man in the other boat said. "Could that be my brother Song Jiang?"

By now, Song Jiang realized that the man's voice sounded familiar, so he called out from the cabin, "Which hero is that on the other boat?! Please save me!"

"It really is my brother," the man said with surprise. "Why didn't you come out earlier?"

Now, Song Jiang ducked out of the cabin, and under the light of the moon and stars, he saw that the man in the other boat was none other than Li (3) Jun (4), aka the River Dragon, aka the leader of the smugglers who had saved Song Jiang from becoming mystery meat at the black tavern in the last episode and then became his sworn brother. As for the other two guys on the boat, they were Li Jun's smuggling buddies, the brothers Tong Wei (1) and Tong Meng (3).

Seeing Song Jiang, Li Jun quickly leaped over to his boat and said, "Brother, you must've been scared. If I had showed up a bit later, you would've been dead. I was restless at home today, so we rowed out here to the river to smuggle some salt. Who knew I would find you in trouble again!"

As he listened to this little exchange, Boatman Zhang looked on dumbfounded. After remaining silent for a good while, he asked, "Brother Li, this dark man is Song Jiang the Timely Rain?"

"Yes!"

Boatman Zhang immediately prostrated and said, "My god! Why didn't you tell me your name earlier? It would've prevented me from almost doing something terrible and hurt you!"

"Who is this hero?" Song Jiang asked Li Jun.

“He is my sworn brother,” Li Jun explained. “His name is Zhang Heng (2), and his nickname is the Boat Flame. He specializes in conducting such ‘quiet and respectable’ business on the Sundown River.”

Hearing this, Song Jiang and both guards started laughing. Ha ha ha. What a good laugh. Another near fatal run-in with a murderous character averted thanks to my reputation. I sure would hate to be anybody else. Ha ha ha ha. Let’s get back on land.

So both boats rowed back to shore. After they secured the boats, they helped Song Jiang and his guards onto land. Then, Li Jun said to Zhang Heng, “Brother, I’m always telling you that no one is more honorable than Song Jiang the Timely Rain. Here’s your chance to take a closer look.”

Zhang Heng struck some flint to light a lamp and held it near Song Jiang. He then kneeled, bowed, and said, “Brother, please pardon my offense!”

In the light of the lamp, Song Jiang sized up Zhang Heng. He was a tall man with triangular eyes, yellow whiskers, red hair, and red eyes.

“Brother, what brings you to these parts?” Zhang Heng asked Song Jiang.

Li Jun then recounted Song Jiang’s backstory, and Zhang Heng said to Song Jiang, “I want to let you know that I have a younger brother named Zhang Shun (4). He’s really something. His whole body is covered with skin as white as snow. He can swim for 15, 20 miles and stay underwater for seven days and seven nights. Because of his abilities in the water and his fighting skills, people call him White Streak in the Waves. The two of us used to run quite a business on the banks of this river.”

“Oh? What business is that?” Song Jiang asked.

“Whenever we lost at the gambling houses, I would dock a boat on shore, pretending to be a private ferryman. A lot of travelers don’t want to pay the extra hundred strings of coins for the government-sanctioned ferry, and they want a quick trip, so they hire me instead. Once my boat is full, my brother would show up, dressed like a traveler and carrying a big bundle, and ask for a ride as well. I

would row the boat to the middle of the river, drop anchor, and flash my knife around, demanding that the travelers pay their toll. Instead of the original price of 500 coins per head, I would demand 3,000. I would start with my brother and demand he pay me. He would pretend to refuse. And then I would grab him by the head and waist and chuck him into the river. After that, I would continue down the line demanding they pay up. The other passengers would be so scared that they couldn't pay me fast enough. Then I would ferry them across to a quiet spot on the other side. Meanwhile my brother would swim away underwater, and we would meet up and divide up the money and go back to gambling. That's how we made our living."

Uhh, ok then. But Song Jiang didn't mind this scammer and near murderer standing in front of him. Instead, he just joked, "There must've been lots of people looking to hire you." And that drew a laugh from everyone.

Zhang Heng then continued, "Now, both my brother and I have changed jobs. I'm just doing some smuggling along this river, while my brother oversees a fishing operation in Jiangzhou. Since you are heading there, I would like to ask you to deliver a letter to him. But I don't know how to write."

Li Jun cut in and said, "We can go find a scribe in the village."

So the Tong brothers stayed behind to watch the boats, and the rest of the group started walking toward the nearby village. After a short stroll, they saw that the section of the riverbank up ahead was still lit up with torches.

"Looks like those two brothers still haven't gone home yet," Zhang Heng said.

"Which brothers are you talking about?" Li Jun asked.

"The Mu (4) brothers from town."

"Then let's call them over and have them meet Brother Song," Li Jun suggested.

Song Jiang quickly stopped him and said, "No no no. They were after me."

“Don’t worry, brother,” Li Jun reassured him. “They didn’t know who you were. We all run in the same circles.”

So Li Jun let out a loud whistle and gave a wave. A moment later, the torch-wielding entourage sprinted onto the scene. When they saw Li Jun and Zhang Heng chit-chatting with Song Jiang, the two brothers were stunned.

“Brothers, how come you’re so friendly with these three?” they asked.

Li Jun laughed out loud and said, “Do you who he is?”

“No. But he gave silver to that medicine peddler back in town and showed us up. We were just about to chase him down.”

“He’s the man I’m always telling you about, Song Jiang the Timely Rain. Hurry up and bow.”

And next thing you know, the two brothers were on their knees doing the “We’re not worthy” thing and asking Song Jiang to forgive them for the entire last day and night. Song Jiang helped them up and asked for their names, and Li Jun made the introductions.

“These two brothers are from a wealthy local family,” he said. “The elder is called Mu (4) Hong (2), with the nickname Unrestrained. The younger is named Mu (4) Chun (1), with nickname Little Restrained.” And by the way, I love the subtle putdown of the younger brother via nicknames. I mean, talk about always living in your older brother’s shadow.

Anyway, Li Jun continued. “There are three powers around here. On Sun-Fetching Peak, Li (3) Li (4) and I are a power. In Jieyang (1,2) Town, these two brothers are a power. And along the banks of the Sundown River, it’s Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun.”

Oh great! A place run by bullies, smugglers, scam artists, and murderers. I bet that works wonders for the local tourism trade.

“I would’ve never known about the three powers,” Song Jiang said. “Since we’re all friends, I hope you can release Xue (1) Yong (3).”

“That medicine peddler? Don’t worry,” said Mu Hong, the elder of the two Mu brothers. “I’ll have my younger brother go fetch him and return him to you. Please come with us to our home so that we may apologize for our offense.”

“Perfect!” Li Jun said. “Let’s go to your house.”

Mu Hong sent a couple workhands to go watch the boats so that the Tong brothers could join them as well. The whole gang then headed back toward the Mu estate, with a messenger running on ahead to tell them to start setting up a feast.

It was 5 a.m. by the time they arrived back at the estate. The Mu brothers invited their father, the old squire, out to meet everyone, and then they sat down in the thatched parlor. Song Jiang took a good look at the Mu Hong, the elder brother, and saw that he was quite the impressive man. His face was like jade, with a round head, fine features, and an impressive, if intimidating, air.

Song Jiang sat across from the old squire and started chatting. Before long, it was starting to get light out, and the younger Mu brother, Mu Chun, came in with the medicine peddler, Xue (1) Yong (3), aka the Sick Tiger. Everybody then drank to their hearts’ content, and the party lasted into the next night, and everyone just ended up staying at the estate.

The next day, Song Jiang wanted to resume his journey, but Mu Hong refused to let him go so soon and kept everyone at his house for another day. They showed Song Jiang some of the scenic spots around town and the surrounding villages. In this way, another three days passed. Song Jiang was worried about missing his deadline for reporting in at the penal colony, so he insisted on leaving. After failing to convince him to stay longer, the whole gang threw him a going-away party.

The next morning, Song Jiang finally bid goodbye to the old squire and his gang of new friends. He also reminded Xue Yong that after spending some time with the Mu brothers, he should go meet up again with Song Jiang in Jiangzhou. And Mu Hong reassured Song Jiang that he would take good care of

Xue Yong. He then presented Song Jiang with a tray of gold and silver, and made sure the two guards got their share as well.

As they prepared to depart, Zhang Heng found someone to write a letter for Song Jiang to take to his younger brother Zhang Shun. Song Jiang packed up the letter, and everyone escorted him to the bank of the river. Mu Hong hired a boat and loaded Song Jiang's luggage in the cabin. Then, they presented him with wine and food on the bank and everyone bid him a teary goodbye. After that, everybody went back to doing what they did before, be it smuggling, scamming, or just bullying passers-by.

As for Song Jiang and his guards, they set out for Jiangzhou on their boat. And they didn't have to choose between deck knife noodles or wontons this time. The boatman was legit, and the wind was at their back, so they soon arrived at Jiangzhou. After they got off the boat, Song Jiang put his cangue back on, the guards got out their paperwork, and they made their way to the prefectural offices, where the prefect of Jiangzhou happened to be holding office hours at that moment.

This prefect was named Cai (4) Dezhong (2,1). He was the ninth son of the premier, Cai Jing. And yes, that would be the same premier Cai Jing that had his birthday presents stolen by the now leader of Liangshan. His son, this Prefect Cai, was notoriously corrupt, not to mention pompous and rude. So you know, your typical Song dynasty high official in this novel. The prefect of Jiangzhou was a sweet gig, as there were a lot of people and wealth in this area. So his father the premier made sure he got the job.

Of course, none of that really mattered to Song Jiang at the moment, since he was just a lowly prisoner. After Prefect Cai inspected the paperwork, he sized up Song Jiang and saw that he had an uncommon appearance. He then asked, "Why is there no paper seal on your cangue?"

The two guards quickly said, "We were drenched by spring showers on the way here, and the seal got soaked and damaged."

“Then quickly, write a statement testifying to that and deliver it to the penal colony outside the city. I’ll send my men to escort the prisoner there.”

The two guards accompanied Song Jiang to the penal colony for processing. An officer from the prefectural offices got some paperwork and accompanied them out of the city. They stopped at a tavern to buy a bowl of wine, and Song Jiang slipped the officer a few taels of silver for, you know, his trouble. They then went to the penal colony and put Song Jiang in a single room to await processing. The officer went to put in a good word for Song Jiang with the warden, took care of the paperwork, and then headed back to the prefectural offices. The two guards, meanwhile, gave Song Jiang back his luggage, thanked him profusely for all the ... umm ... adventures, and then headed back to the city to get their paperwork signed before they went home. As they walked, they said to each other, “We had some close calls, but we did end up getting a lot of silver.”

Meanwhile, back at the penal colony, Song Jiang tended to the usual routine, which he of course knew quite well, given his experience in the ancient Chinese legal system. When the jailer showed up in his room, he was greeted with 10 taels of silver. Another 10 taels went to the warden, and varying amounts also landed in the hands of the various bureaucrats and soldiers working at the penal colony. So it wasn’t long before Song Jiang had himself a nice little fan club among the staff.

A little later, Song Jiang was brought to the main hall for his official check-in.

“Song Jiang, the new prisoner, listen up,” the warden said. “According to laws established by the founding emperor, newly arrived convicts must receive a caning of 100 strokes. Guards, put him down on the ground.”

“Sir, I came down with a cold on the journey here and haven’t recovered yet,” Song Jiang replied.



“This guy does look like he’s sick,” the warden said, with newfound silver rattling in his sleeve. “Look at how yellow and skinny he is. He must still be sick. We’ll postpone that caning. Since he used to be a magisterial clerk, we will assign him to be a scribe in the penal colony’s documents office.”

Ah, it’s good to see the legal system running so smoothly. Song Jiang thanked the warden, fetched his belongings, and set up residence in the documents office. The other inmates, recognizing that this guy obviously had connections and money, bought some wine to congratulate him on ... umm ... successfully navigating the ancient Chinese legal system. The next day, he returned the favor. Before long, he treated the jailer to wine. And the warden, having received his share of silver, took good care of Song Jiang, sending him gifts from time to time. And since he had plenty of money, Song Jiang had no shortage of newfound friends. Within half a month, everybody at the penal colony LOVED him. As the old saying goes, “Guide your actions by the moods of the powerful, and treat a man according to his status.”

One day, Song Jiang was drinking with the jailer in the documents office, and the jailer said, “Brother, I mentioned to you a while back that you need to send some gifts to the superintendent. Why haven’t you done it yet? It’s already been more than 10 days. He’s coming tomorrow. It’s not going to look good.”

“No worries,” Song Jiang said. “If HE wants money, I’ve got nothing for him. Now, if you need money, just come ask me. But I have nothing for the superintendent. When he gets here, I’ll know what to say.”

“Sir, that guy is really fierce, and he’s a good fighter, too,” the jailer cautioned. “If you say the wrong thing and it gets ugly, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Let him do what he wants; don’t worry,” Song Jiang said. “I can handle him. Maybe I’ll give him something, or maybe not. Maybe he’ll be afraid to ask me. Who knows.”

Just then, a guard came in and said, "The superintendent is in the main hall, and he's PISSED! He keeps cursing and saying, 'Why didn't the new prisoner send me my share?' "

"See? I told you," the jailer said. "Now he's even going to take it out on us."

But Song Jiang just smiled and said, "Brother, excuse me for a minute. I have to go. We'll drink again another day. Let me go talk to him."

"We don't want to see him," the jailer said he got up to go.

Song Jiang took his leave of the jailer and headed to the main hall. There, he found the superintendent seated in a chair, shouting, "Which one is the new prisoner?!"

The guard pointed at Song Jiang. "That's him."

"You dark short bastard! Who's backing you that you dare to not send me my share of silver?!"

"Gifts must be given willingly," Song Jiang replied. "They can't be forced. You're very petty."

Now, this was just pouring gasoline on fire, and everyone present was sweating for Song Jiang. The superintendent flew into an even bigger rage and cursed, "Damn crook! How dare you be so rude?! Call me petty?! Guards, put him down and give him 100 strokes!"

Now, everybody there were on friendly terms with Song Jiang, and nobody wanted to be the villain and beat him. So when the superintendent gave that order, everyone just scrambled, which, just from an operational chain-of-command standpoint, was like, what the hell? In any case, the superintendent was now left alone with Song Jiang, and the sight of everyone running away instead of carrying out his order just pissed him off even more. So he grabbed a staff and stomped over to beat Song Jiang himself.

"Sir, why do you want to beat me? What crime have I committed?" Song Jiang asked.

"You damn crook! You're in my hands now, so even a light cough would be a crime!"

"Even so, that doesn't merit the death penalty."

"If I want to kill you, it won't be hard. It would be like swatting a fly!"

Song Jiang chuckled and said, "So, if not greasing your palm warrants death, then what punishment should one get for being an associate of Professor Wu from Liangshan?"

Those words stopped the superintendent dead in his tracks. He tossed aside the staff and asked, "What did you say?"

"I was talking about being an associate of Professor Wu. Why do you ask?"

The superintendent fell into a panic. He clutched Song Jiang and asked, "Who are you? Why are you saying that?"

Laughing, Song Jiang said, "I am Song Jiang, from Yuncheng County."

Stunned, the superintendent quickly clasped his hands together in a gesture of respect and said, "Turns out you're the Timely Rain!"

"Oh it's nothing," Song Jiang humble-bragged.

The superintendent said, "Brother, this is no place to talk, so I dare not bow to you here. Let's go into the city and have a cup of wine. Please come with me."

"Fine, I'll go with you for a bit," Song Jiang said. "Let me go lock my door."

So he rushed back to his room, took out the letter that Wu Yong had given him back when he stopped at Liangshan on the way here, got some silver, and locked the room. He asked the guard to keep an eye on the room and then left the penal colony with the superintendent. They hurried into the city of Jiangzhou, went into a tavern along the street, and sat down upstairs.

"Brother, where did you see Professor Wu?" the superintendent asked.

Song Jiang gave him the letter. After reading it, the superintendent stashed the letter in his sleeve, got up, and bowed to Song Jiang. Song Jiang quickly returned the gesture and said, "Please pardon my rude words just now."

The superintendent said, "I heard that there was a new prisoner in the penal colony whose last name was Song. By custom, new prisoners always send me five taels of silver. And it had been 10 days

and I still had not received it. I was free today, so I came to collect. Turns out it was you. I offended you with my words in the penal colony. Please forgive me!”

Song Jiang replied, “The jailer often mentions your great name to me. I wanted to make your acquaintance but didn’t know where you lived and I had no excuse to come into the city, so I waited for you to come to me so that I can meet you. That’s the reason for the delay. It’s not that I couldn’t bear to part with five taels of silver. I just delayed on purpose to get to meet you in person. Now that I’ve met you, my life’s wish has been fulfilled.”

So, who was this guy? In case you forgot, a couple episodes back, when Song Jiang was “invited” up to Liangshan for a few days, the bandits’ strategist, Wu Yong, told him about a friend who was the superintendent in Jiangzhou, whose name was Dai (4) Zong (1). And this was him. This Dai Zong had an amazing talent. When he’s sent to deliver urgent military reports, he would strap a picture of a god to each leg, say an incantation, and poof, he would be able to travel 160-some miles a day on foot. If he doubled the number of god pictures, he could travel for something like 260 miles a day. So he was basically like the Flash. For that, people called him the Magic Traveler.

Now that they’ve been properly introduced to each other, Song Jiang and Dai Zong started chatting and drinking, and they really hit it off. After just a few cups of wine, though, they suddenly heard some loud ruckus downstairs, and a minute later, a waiter rushed into their room and said to Dai Zong, “Sorry sir, but only you can calm him down. Please do something.”

“Who’s making all that racket?” Dai Zong asked.

“That Brother Li (3) the Iron Ox, the one who follows you everywhere. He’s trying to borrow money downstairs.”

“He’s acting up again, huh?” Dai Zong said with a chuckle. “And here I was wondering who it could be.” He then said to Song Jiang, “Brother, stay here a while. I’ll go bring him up here.”

Dai Zong got up and went downstairs. He returned momentarily, followed by a swarthy, hulking figure. This man had dark skin like charcoal, a pair of red eyes, and a ferocious appearance. Song Jiang was taken aback a bit when he saw this guy and asked Dai Zong for his name.

“He’s a low-level jailer who works for me. His name is Li (3) Kui (2). He has a nickname, the Black Whirlwind, and people in his home village all call him the Iron Ox. He once beat a man to death, so he fled from home. Even though his offense has been reduced by the amnesty, he has remained adrift on the jianghu scene and has not returned home. He’s a mean drunk, so everyone is afraid of him. But he can wield two war axes and is good at fighting. Right now he’s working in the penal colony here.”

Just then, this Li Kui interrupted Dai Zong and asked, “Brother, who is this dark fella?”

Dai Zong smiled at Song Jiang and said, “See how rude he is? He has no sense at all.”

“Brother, why do you say I’m rude?” Li Kui asked.

Dai Zong told him, “Brother, you should say, ‘May I please inquire who this gentleman is?’ Not ‘Who is this dark fella?’ How is that not rude? Listen, this gentleman is the noble brother you are always talking about going to see.”

“Wait, he’s Dark Song Jiang, the Timely Rain?”

“Hey, show some respect!” Dai Zong again reproached Li Kui. “How can you call him that? Know your place. And why haven’t you bowed to him yet?”

“If he really is Song Jiang, then I’ll bow to him. If he’s not, then why the hell would I bow? Brother, stop messing with me.”

Song Jiang now said, “I am indeed Dark Song Jiang.”

Clapping his hands, Li Kui exclaimed, “My god! Why didn’t you say so earlier?! That would’ve made me so happy!” As he spoke, he dropped to his knees and kowtowed.

So, this Li Kui sure sounds like a character. To see what other faux pas he will commit, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll have an exciting fight between two guys over, of all things, fish. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!