

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 55.

Last time, after many interesting and sometimes life-threatening diversions, Song Jiang finally arrived at the penal colony at Jiangzhou Prefecture. He wasted no time endearing himself to everyone by filling their pockets with silver. He then met Dai Zong, the superintendent in the prefecture who was friends with Wu Yong, the No. 2 guy on Liangshan. Song Jiang became fast friends with Dai Zong, and then Dai Zong introduced him to a hulking, swarthy man named Li Kui, a low-level jailer who worked at the penal colony. As it turned out, Li Kui was, like everyone else in this novel, a longtime admirer of Song Jiang.

As we rejoin the story, Song Jiang, Dai Zong, and Li Kui were just getting to know each other in a tavern in the city of Jiangzhou. After they were introduced, Song Jiang asked Li Kui to sit down and have a drink.

“I can’t stand drinking with small cups,” Li Kui answered. “Let’s switch to big bowls.”

“So brother,” Song Jiang asked, “What was the cause of all the ruckus downstairs just now?”

“I had a big silver ingot that I pawned for 10 taels of smaller pieces for some needs. I asked the tavern keeper to lend me 10 taels of silver so I could go get back my big silver ingot. And then I would pay him back, and I would still have some spending money left. But that bastard won’t lend me the money! I was just about to smash up his place, but then Brother Dai Zong called me here.”

“You just need 10 taels of silver to get back your ingot?” Song Jiang asked. “Do you need to pay any interest?”

“The interest is included in the 10 taels,” Li Kui said.

Song Jiang now took out a 10-tael piece of silver and handed it to Li Kui. “Brother, go get back your ingot.”

Dai Zong was just about to intervene, but Song Jiang had already handed the silver over to Li Kui. Li Kui took it and said, "Great! Brothers, wait for me here. I'll go get my silver and be right back, and then we'll take Brother Song outside the city for a bowl of wine."

"Have a seat, have a few bowls first," Song Jiang said.

"Nah, I'll be right back," Li Kui said as he pushed through the door curtain and went downstairs.

Once Li Kui left, Dai Zong said to Song Jiang, "Brother, you shouldn't have given him that silver. I was just about to stop you, but you had already put it in his hands."

"Why do you say that?" Song Jiang asked.

"That knave may be pretty straight, but he loves to drink and gamble. Where would he have gotten a big silver ingot to pawn? He just scammed you for your silver. He must have rushed off to gamble just now. If he wins, then he'll bring your money back. But if he loses, where would you go to get your money? It'll make me look bad."

But Song Jiang just laughed and said, "Brother, why do you speak as though I'm a stranger? That silver is a trifle of a thing. If he went to gamble and lost, so be it. He actually seems like a loyal, honest man to me."

"He has his good points," Dai Zong said. "But he's just too rude and rash. Whenever he gets drunk, he would have run-ins with people at the penal colony and beat up the toughest guards, even causing trouble for me. He cannot abide injustices and tears into bullies, so everyone in this city fears him."

Song Jiang, though, didn't worry about it. He told Dai Zong, "Let's drink a few more cups and then go do some sightseeing outside the city."

"Sure. I should've thought to take you to see the sights on the river."

"That's exactly what I wanted to see. Perfect!"

While Song Jiang and Dai Zong continued their drinking, let's go check in on Li Kui. After he got the silver from Song Jiang, he thought to himself, "That Brother Song just met me and he already lent me 10 taels of silver. He truly lives up to his reputation as a generous and honorable man, and now he's here. But I've been losing my shirt at the gambling houses these past few days and don't have any money to treat him. Now that he gave me these 10 taels, why don't I go gamble a bit and try to win some money so I can buy him wine and look good."

So he rushed out of the city to a gambling establishment run by a certain Little Zhang. He stomped into the gambling ring and threw the 10 taels of silver on the ground, shouting, "Let me have the toss coins!" which was basically like asking for the dice.

That Little Zhang knew Li Kui was an honest gambler, so he said, "Brother, wait a bit. You can get in on the next round."

"No! I want this round!"

"Then you can guess the numbers from the sidelines."

"No! I don't want to do that! I want to toss! Five taels of silver on each wager."

Another gambler was getting ready for his toss, but Li Kui grabbed the coins from him and asked, "Who am I betting against?"

"You can bet against me; five taels of silver," Little Zhang said.

Li Kui tossed the coins and shouted, "Tails!" But they came up heads. And Little Zhang reached down and took his silver.

"Hey, that's a 10-tael piece!" Li Kui shouted.

"Fine, then let's wager another five taels of silver," Little Zhang said. "If you win, I'll give this back to you."

So Li Kui picked up the coins again and tossed them again, shouting "Tails!" But won't you know it; they came up heads again.

Little Zhang smiled and said, "See, I told you to wait. You won't listen to me, and now you got two heads in a row."

"But that silver doesn't belong to me," Li Kui said.

"Doesn't matter whose silver it was. You lost, so what of it?"

"C'mon, lend me some money," Li Kui begged. "I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"What kind of BS is that? In the gambling ring there's no such thing as family. You clearly lost, so why are you hassling me?"

Oh boy, now you've done it. Li Kui hitched up the front of his gown and glowered, "Are you going to give that money back to me or not?!"

"Brother Li, you're always the most honest gambler. What's up with you today?" Little Zhang asked.

But Li Kui did not answer. Instead, he just grabbed his silver from the ground, and while he was at it, he also snatched another 10 taels of silver that someone else had put down. He stashed the money in his shirt, and then opened both eyes wide, and said, "I'm usually an honest gambler, but today I'm not. Deal with it!"

Little Zhang rushed forward to try to take the silver back, but Li Kui just tossed him to the ground. And next thing you know, a dozen or so gambling addicts were trying to bum-rush Li Kui to take back the silver, but Li Kui was like, "Yeah bring it!" Before anyone could say ouch, Li Kui's fists were flying all over the place, and all the gamblers were running out the door. When Li Kui headed for the front door, the bouncer asked where he was going, and got his answer when Li Kui tossed him aside, kicked open the door, and stomped out.

The whole gang of bruised and battered gamblers followed him outside, but instead of chasing him, they all remained in the doorway and shouted, "Brother Li, you're so unreasonable! How can you take our silver?"

As Li Kui was stomping off, someone caught up to him from behind, grabbed his shoulder, and shouted, "You knave! Why did you steal someone else's stuff?!"

"Mind your own damn business!" Li Kui growled as he turned around, but he froze when he saw that it was Dai Zong, and that Song Jiang was standing right behind. His rage quickly turned into shame, and he muttered to Song Jiang, "Brother, please excuse me. I'm usually an honest gambler, but I lost your silver today, and I didn't have any money to treat you. I panicked and did this dishonorable thing in the heat of the moment."

Song Jiang just laughed and said, "Brother, if you need silver, just come ask me. Since you lost fair and square, hurry up and return their money."

So Li Kui sheepishly took out the money from his shirt pocket and gave it to Song Jiang. Song Jiang called Little Zhang over and gave him back the silver. Little Zhang took it and said, "Sirs, I'll just take back my own money. As for the 10 taels that Brother Li lost to me, I am willing to give it back to him so that he won't hold it against me."

Now this was a smart guy talking. But Song Jiang said, "You just keep it; don't hold a grudge."

But Little Zhang kept refusing. Song Jiang now asked, "Did he hurt you guys?"

"Well, he beat up the game master ... and the collector ... and the bouncer."

"In that case, let this money be their compensation," Song Jiang said. "If you don't dare to accept this for them, then I'll take it to them myself."

Only now did Little Zhang accept the silver. He bowed to say thanks and then went back inside.

With that mess cleaned up, Song Jiang now said, "Brother Li, let's go drink a few cups."

Dai Zong chimed in, "There is a Pipa (2,2) Pavilion by the river up ahead. It was once frequented by the famous Tang Dynasty poet Bai (2) Juyi (1,4), and it's a tavern now. Let's go to the pavilion for a few cups of wine and enjoy the scenery."

And by the way, this Tang Dynasty poet that Dai Zong just mentioned lived during the 8th and 9th century, so about 300 years before the time of our story. So this pavilion was a historical site.

“Do we need to buy some food and such from the city to take with us?” Song Jiang asked.

“Nah. They sell wine and food there now,” Dai Zong explained.

“Perfect!”

So the three of them headed to the Pipa Pavilion. Pipa, by the way, is a string instrument that’s kind of like a lute. When they got there, they climbed up the stairs to the top floor of the pavilion. One side of the pavilion was facing the Sundown River, while the other side was the tavern keeper’s house. In the pavilion there were a dozen or so tables. Dai Zong picked out a clean one and asked Song Jiang to sit at the head of the table, while he himself sat across and Li Kui sat down to the side between them. They then asked the waiter to bring vegetables, fruits, seafood, and wine. The waiter brought out two jugs of Jade Bottle Spring Wine, a famous vintage in these parts, and removed the clay stoppers from the jugs.

As the waiter was laying out the food and wine, Song Jiang looked out across the river and took in its incredible views. In the distance, tall peaks towered into the clouds while the silver water shimmered. Gulls and herons took off from sandbars, while countless small fishing boats drifted among the reeds, and the snow-white waves tumbled as a cool breeze swept across the water.

Just then, this beautiful scene was interrupted by Li Kui, who said, “If we’re going to drink, then let’s drink with big bowls. I can’t stand drinking with little cups!”

“Brother, behave yourself!” Dai Zong scolded him. “You just shut up and drink.”

But Song Jiang happily obliged his colorful new friend and told the waiter, “Give two of us small cups, but put a big bowl in front of that brother.”

The waiter did as he asked, and soon the wine was flowing and the table was covered with food. Li Kui smiled and said, “Brother Song, you’re awesome, just like everyone says! You really understand me. You’re a friend worth having.”

For his part, Song Jiang was also quite happy to have made two new friends today. So he drank heartily as well. After five or six rounds, he started to crave some spicy fish soup, so he asked Dai Zong, "Is there any good fresh fish here?"

Wait, we're sitting on a pavilion by a river, and you're asking if there's fresh fish?

"Brother, do you not see all the fishing boats on the river?" Dai Zong said with a smile. "THIS is the land of fish and rice. How can there not be fresh fish?"

"It would be great if we can get some spicy fish soup to sober up," Song Jiang said.

So Dai Zong called the waiter over and ordered three servings of fish in hot pepper soup. When the soups arrived, Song Jiang couldn't help but say, "Beautiful crockery is even more satisfying than delicious food. This may just be a tavern, but their serving ware is really nice."

He invited his friends to dive in, and then he picked up his chopsticks and took a bite of the fish had a few sips of soup, but then he stopped. Turns out the serving ware really WAS the highlight of this dish.

Next to him, though, Li Kui was not quite so picky. In fact, he didn't even bother with chopsticks. He just reached into his bowl and scooped up the fish with his hands and wolfed it down. He even chewed up the bones and swallowed them. Song Jiang couldn't help but chuckle at this sight. He then took a couple more sips of his own soup and just had to set it aside.

"Brother, you must not like this fish because it's been salted," Dai Zong said.

"After I drink I really like to have some fresh fish soup," Song Jiang said. "This fish ... really isn't that great."

"Yeah, even I can't eat it. Salted fish is no good," Dai Zong agreed.

When he heard that, Li Kui quickly said, "Well brothers, since you two won't eat yours, then I'll help you."

He reached over and took the fish out of Song Jiang's bowl and chomped it down, and then did the same with Dai Zong's fish. In the process, he left the table covered with fish soup drippings. Thanks man. That's just ... great.

Watching Li Kui devour the three bowls of fish bone and all, Song Jiang called the waiter over and said, "This brother of mine must be hungry. Bring him two catties of meat, in big slices. I'll pay for it all together in a bit."

The waiter replied, "We just sell mutton here, not beef. But if you want fatty mutton, we've got plenty."

When he heard that, Li Kui grabbed one of the bowls of fish soup and flung it at the waiter, covering the poor man in fish juice.

"What the hell are you doing now?!" Dai Zong shouted at him.

"That bastard is so rude!" Li Kui shouted back. "He thinks I just eat beef and won't sell me any mutton."

"I was just asking," the waiter said.

Ok, so like Dai Zong said, what the hell? Why did Li Kui get all pissed off at the insinuation that he only ate beef and not mutton? Well, apparently beef was the low-class, cheap meat. So just imagine that waiter speaking in a snooty French accent, going, "We don't serve beef here." But there actually might be more to this little exchange. However, it's too long for me to get into here without distracting from the narrative, so I'll do a supplemental episode about beef. Be on the lookout for that.

Anyway, trying to make peace, Song Jiang told the waiter to tend to the order and that he would pay him later. The waiter begrudgingly went off and returned with a platter holding two catties of mutton. Li Kui did not stand on ceremony and started wolfing it down. In just a few moments, all the meat was gone.



“Impressive,” Song Jiang said. “A true man!”

“Brother Song gets me,” Li Kui said. “Meat is so much better than fish.”

Dai Zong now summoned the waiter and asked, “That fish soup we had just now, the bowls were really nice, but the fish was salted and didn’t taste good. If you have fresh fish, make some spicy soup with it to help my friend here sober up.”

The waiter replied, “Superintendent, to tell you the truth, that fish was from last night. Today’s fresh catch are still on the boats, but until their boss arrives, they dare not start selling, so we don’t have any fresh fish yet.”

Li Kui leapt to his feet and said, “I’ll go get a couple fish for you, brother.”

“No, don’t you go,” Dai Zong said. “Just ask the waiter to go get a few fish.”

“But those fishermen won’t dare to say no to me!”

Dai Zong tried time and again to stop him, but Li Kui just stomped off.

“Brother, I’m sorry to have brought someone like that out with us,” Dai Zong apologized to Song Jiang. “He has no manners at all. So embarrassing!”

“He’s born stubborn, how can anyone get him to change?” Song Jiang said. “But I actually respect his honesty.”

While the two of them shot the breeze, Li Kui made his way to the river bank. There, about 80 or 90 small fishing boats were lined up in a row, tied up to willow trees along the shoreline. Some of the fishermen were snoozing on their boats, some were repairing their nets on land, and others were taking a bath in the water. It was the middle of the fifth month, and the sun was starting to plunge toward the western horizon, and still the fishermen’s boss had not showed up yet.

Li Kui walked down to the boats and shouted, “Hey, you guys! Give me a couple live fish!”

“Our boss isn’t here yet; we don’t dare to start selling,” the fishermen replied. “Look, don’t you see all the peddlers waiting on the bank?”

“Screw your boss! Give me two fish now!” Li Kui scoffed.

“We haven't burned the sacrificial paper ingots yet, how can we start selling?”

Well, since the fishermen refused to sell, Li Kui decided to take matters into his own hands. He jumped onto one of the boats, and pushed his way past the fisherman. He reached into the fish tank that’s built into the boat, groped around, and pulled up a bamboo partition that looked like a cover of some sort. He chucked that aside and reached back into the tank, but found no fish.

Hmm. Maybe this fisherman didn’t have any luck today. Li Kui jumped onto the next boat and reached into that tank, pulled up another bamboo partition, and groped around, but no fish there either. What’s the deal?

So, Li Kui didn’t know anything about fishing, so he wasn’t aware that these fishing boats were built with large openings in their stern that allowed water to flow in so that fish could be kept alive in the hold. Of course, you had to block the opening with something so the fish won’t just swim out back into the river. Aaaand that’s what the bamboo partition was for. So when Li Kui yanked out the partitions, he unwittingly released all the fish in the hold.

He was just about to check another boat, but by now about 70-some fishermen were bum-rushing him, trying to beat him off with bamboo poles. That, of course, was a mistake, as it only riled him up. He stripped down to nothing but a loincloth and started to fight back. When the bamboo poles swung his way, he reached out with both hands and grabbed hold of about five or six of them and snapped them as if they were green onions. The fishermen were all taken aback, so instead of fighting, they all untied their boats and rowed away, leaving Li Kui stewing in anger. To take out that anger, he grabbed a couple broken poles, jumped back onto land, and chased off the peddlers.

In the midst of this ruckus, a man appeared onto the scene from a backroad. When people saw him, they all shouted, "The boss is here! Boss, that big dark man is trying to take our fish and chased off the boats!"

"What big dark man?! How dare he?" the boss said.

Everyone pointed toward Li Kui and said, "There! The guy that's looking for people to beat up along the bank."

The boss rushed over and shouted at Li Kui, "You've got some gall to come mess up my business!"

Li Kui sized up this guy. He was of medium height, about maybe 32 or 33 years old. He had a mustache and goatee and wore a black headscarf, with a lock of hair protruding and bound by a blood-red string. He wore a white cloth gown, tied at the waist with a red sash. His feet were clad in hemp sandals, and in his hands, he held a scale for weighing fish.

This guy was on his way to sell fish, and when he saw Li Kui beating up everyone, he handed his scales to an assistant and rushed over, shouting, "Hey you! Who are you trying to beat up?!"

Li Kui didn't even bother answering. He just swung his bamboo poles at this guy. The guy charged in and grabbed the poles, but that was a strategic error. Before he knew it, Li Kui had him by the hair, so he tried to grab Li Kui's legs and trip him. But he tried three times, all in vain, as Li Kui was simply too big and strong for that. So now the guy punched Li Kui in the ribs, but this turned out to be one of those cartoony fight scenes where the little pipsqueak keeps punching and the big guy doesn't even feel a thing. The guy now tried to kick Li Kui, but Li Kui was like, please, and just shoved the man's head down and started going to town on his back like a drum with his iron fists. And Li Kui was so strong that the guy couldn't even struggle.

Just as Li Kui was getting into it, someone suddenly wrapped him up around the waist from behind, while another man grabbed his arm, shouting, "Stop! Stop!" Li Kui turned and saw Song Jiang and Dai

Zong, and that made him loosen his grip on his foe. The second that happened, the man slipped away and disappeared like smoke.

Dai Zong was now like, “Dude, I left you alone for 5 minutes. FIVE MINUTES!”

“I told you to not come get fish, and now you’re getting into fights!” Dai Zong scolded him. “If you accidentally kill someone, you’d have to pay for it with your life!”

“What? You are worried that I would cause trouble for you?” Li Kui shot back. “If I kill someone, I’ll take all the blame.”

“Brother, don't say that,” Song Jiang said, trying to make peace. “Get your shirt and let’s go back to drinking.”

So Li Kui went to the foot of a willow tree and retrieved his gown, threw it over his shoulder, and started walking back to the tavern with Song Jiang and Dai Zong. But they had not gone 10 paces when someone shouted from behind, “Hey dark scoundrel! Let’s settle this now!”

Li Kui turned and saw that it was the fishermen’s boss that he had just pummeled. He was now stripped down to just a loincloth, exposing his snow-white skin. He was rowing a fishing boat along the bank, chasing after Li Kui, and cursing, “Scoundrel! If I am afraid of you, then I’m not a real man. If you run away, then you’re not a real man either!”

Well, them’s fighting words, and Li Kui was never one to shrink from a fight. Enraged, he let out an angry roar, tossed his gown aside, and turned around to face his foe. The fisherman’s boss now rowed his boat right up to the bank, pushed the bamboo pole into the bottom of the river to hold the boat in place, and kept cursing.

“If you’re a real man, come up on land!” Li Kui cursed back.

But the fisherman’s boss started swiping at Li Kui’s feet with his bamboo pole, and that enraged Li Kui even further. So he leaped onto the boat in one mighty bound. The very next second, though, the

fisherman used the pole to push off against the bank, and the boat darted toward the center of the river.

Li Kui knew how to swim a little bit, but he was by no means at home in the water, so he was starting to get a little panicky. Now, the fisherman stopped cursing, tossed his bamboo pole aside, and said, "C'mon, now let's settle this."

He quickly grabbed hold of Li Ku's shoulder and said, "I'm not going to fight you yet. I'll let you have a drink first."

As he spoke, he gave the boat a hard rock with his feet, and the boat immediately capsized, sending both men into the water. By now, Song Jiang and Dai Zong had rushed to the river bank and were going "Oh crap!" when they saw the boat go bottom-up. Meanwhile, about 500 onlookers had gathered under the willow trees, and they were all saying, "Well, that big dark fella is in for it now. Even if he survives this, his belly is going to be full of water."

To see if Li Kui survives this, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, just who is this fisherman? To find out, join us next time. Thanks for listening!