

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 58.

Last time, the poop hit the fan for Song Jiang as his drunken poetry landed him in jail for sedition. The prefect sent Dai Zong to deliver a letter to the prefect's father, the premier Cai Jing, to ask whether he should send Song Jiang to the capital or execute him locally. Dai Zong, not knowing the content of the letter he was carrying, stumbled into the tavern that was serving as a front for the bandits of Liangshan. Soon, he found himself on Liangshan, telling the bandit chieftains about Song Jiang's predicament.

The bandit leader Chao Gai wanted to mobilize his forces to go save Song Jiang, but the military strategist Wu Yong said that won't do, but that he had an idea.

"Right now, Prefect Cai is sending Dai Zong to the capital to ask the premier for instructions," Wu Yong said. "My scheme revolves around this letter. Let's turn their plan against them and forge a letter for Dai Zong to take back to the prefect. The letter would say, 'Take no action against the prisoner Song Jiang. Send him to the capital under guard. Once he has been interrogated, we will execute him here publicly so as to put an end to the circulating children's rhyme.' Then, when they are escorting him through here, we can ambush them and save him. What do you think?"

"But what if they don't come through here?" Chao Gai asked. "Won't that mess up the plan?"

But Gongsun Sheng, the Daoist priest who was the No. 3 chieftain, said, "That's not a problem. We can send men to conduct recon. Whichever route they are taking, we'll be waiting to pounce. The only concern is whether we can trick them into coming."

But Chao Gao raised another concern. "This is a good plan, but we don't have anyone who can copy Premier Cai Jing's handwriting."

"I've already thought of that," Wu Yong said. "Right now, there are four popular calligraphy styles in the realm, including Cai Jing's. I once knew a scholar who lives in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. His name is Xiao (1) Rang (4). Because he could mimic all the different calligraphy styles, everyone calls him the Sacred-Handed Scholar. He also knows how to handle weapons. I know he can forge Cai Jing's

handwriting, so why don't we send Dai Zong to his home and tell him that a temple wants to hire him to write the inscription on their tablet and that they are sending along 50 taels of silver as down payment? Once we lure him here, we can send someone to trick his family into coming here as well, so that he will join our gang. How's that?"

"But even after he writes the letter, we would still need to have the proper seal to stamp it with," said Chao Gai, who apparently woke up on the contrarian side of the bed this morning.

But Wu Yong answered, "I have another acquaintance that I've been thinking of. He, too, is unique. He's also living in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. His name is Jin (1) Dajian (4,1). He's very skilled at making engravings and carving seals. He also can wield weapons and fight. Because of his jade-carving skills, people call him the Jade-Armed Craftsman. Let's also bring him 50 taels of silver and say he's being hired to engrave a tablet. And we'll do the same thing with him. Our operation will have uses for both of these men."

"Great idea!" Chao Gai exclaimed. So that day, they held a banquet to welcome Dai Zong, and he stayed in the stronghold that night.

The next morning, they asked Dai Zong to dress up like a deacon, take along a couple hundred taels of silver, and head out. He crossed back over to the other side of the water and rushed toward Jizhou Prefecture. Within four hours, he had arrived at the prefectural seat. He went into the city and asked around for the residence of Xiao (1) Rang (4), the Sacred-Handed Scholar. Someone told him that Xiao Rang lived by the Confucian Temple on the east side of the prefectural offices, so Dai Zong found his way there, cleared his throat, and called out, "Is Mr. Xiao at home?"

A scholar came out and asked, "Deacon, where are you from? What may I help you with?"

Dai Zong bowed and said, "I am the deacon from the temple in Tainan (4,2). Right now, we are renovating one of our buildings, and a local big man wants to dedicate a stone tablet. He sent me to

deliver 50 taels of silver as down payment to hire you to go to the temple and write the inscription. We have a deadline that we must meet.”

Xiao Rang replied, “But I only know how to write words, nothing else. If you are erecting a stone tablet, you’ll need to hire an engraver as well.”

“I have another 50 taels of silver here,” Dai Zong said. “They’re for hiring Jin (1) Dajian (4,1), the Jade-Armed Craftsman, to make the engraving. Since we have a deadline, I hope you can help me find him and we can travel together.”

Well, 50 taels of silver were nothing to sneeze at, So Xiao Rang went with Dai Zong to look for Jin Dajian. As they passed the temple, Xiao Rang pointed and said, “That’s him coming toward us now.” So Xiao Rang flagged down Jin Dajian, introduced him to Dai Zong, and explained that Dai Zong was there to hire the two of them to make a tablet for a temple. Jin Dajian was delighted at the 50 taels of silver, so he and Xiao Rang invited Dai Zong out to a tavern for wine and food.

After the wine, Dai Zong mentioned the deadline again and suggested they get on the road right away. But Xiao Rang said, “It’s really hot. Even if we leave today, we won’t be able to travel very far. Certainly not far enough to reach an inn before night. Let’s leave at 5 a.m. tomorrow morning.”

Jin Dajian agreed, so it was settled. They each went home to pack for the trip, and Xiao Rang let Dai Zong crash on his couch that night. The next morning, they met up at 5 a.m. and left the city. After about three miles, Dai Zong said, “Sirs, you may travel at your own pace. I will go on ahead to tell our leading families to come greet you.”

So Dai Zong sprinted off and soon disappeared. Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian then continued at their methodical pace. By early afternoon, they had covered almost 30 miles. Suddenly, a loud whistle echoed across the hills in front, and a group of about 50 men appeared out of nowhere. The man at their head was Wang Ying (1) the Stumpy Tiger, one of the Liangshan chieftains.

“Hey, who are you two, and where are you going?!” Wang Ying shouted at the travelers. “Men, go bring me their hearts to chase my wine.”

Xiao Rang replied, “We are going to Tainan (4,2) to engrave a tablet. We don’t have any money, just some clothes.”

“I don’t want your clothes,” Wang Ying shot back. “I just want your hearts to chase wine with.”

Now, Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian both knew how to handle a weapon, so they weren’t ones to tolerate fools or what appeared to be random low-level bandits. So they wielded their staffs and charged at Wang Ying. Wang Ying raised his long-handle broadsword to meet them. After a few bouts, Wang Ying turned and ran. Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian were just about to give chase when suddenly, the sound of gongs rang out from the hills, and from those hills charged out another 100-some men, led by the chieftains Song Wan the Giant in the Clouds, Du Qian the Skyscraper, and Zheng Tianshou the Fair-skin Gentleman. They bum-rushed the travelers and dragged them into the woods.

Once in the woods, though, the four chieftains were singing a different tune. They told Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian, “Don’t worry. Chieftain Chao Gai ordered us to come invite you to join our gang.”

“But why would you guys want us?” Xiao Rang said. “We aren’t even strong enough to strangle a chicken. We would just be extra mouths to feed.”

But the chieftain Du Qian said, “Professor Wu is acquainted with the two of you and knows your skills, so he sent Dai Zong to go invite you.”

Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian were left speechless as they looked at each other. Soon, they found themselves at the tavern run by Zhu Gui, who did his usual routine of wine-them, dine-them, and shoot an arrow across the pond. That night, a boat came over to ferry them across to the stronghold, where Chao Gai, Wu Yong and all the other chieftains welcomed them, threw them a banquet, and explained why they had been ... umm ... invited to join this distinguished club in the name of honor.

After hearing the whole story, Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian took hold of Wu Yong and said, "We don't mind staying here, but we both have families back home. When the authorities find out, they'll be in trouble."

"No need to worry, brothers," Wu Yong said. "You'll see come morning."

And so they feasted through the night, and as dawn approached, a bandit lackey reported to Wu Yong and said, "They're all here."

"Brothers, please go welcome your families," Wu Yong told the newest members of the gang. Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian were half in disbelief, but when they were midway down the mountain, they saw a bunch of sedan chairs coming up the hill, carrying their families. This sight left them stunned, and they asked their families how they ended up here.

Their families told them, "After you left yesterday, this group of men showed up with sedan chairs, saying you had suffered a heat stroke and were laid up at an inn outside the city, and that we needed to go to you at once to try to save you. But once we left the city, they refused to let us get out of the sedan chairs and carried us all the way here."

Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian were again left speechless. I mean, this was pretty much just straight-up abduction, but hey, it could be worse. At least this time the bandits actually fetched their families, unlike when they recruited Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. Just ask him how that turned out. In any case, Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian now had no choice but to return to the fort and officially throw in their lot with the gang of bandits.

Wu Yong now discussed the matter of forging the letter to save Song Jiang. Xiao Rang and Jin Dajian got to work, and before long, the letter was written, stamped, and sealed. The bandits then set up a banquet to send Dai Zong off. He stashed the letter, took his leave, went back across the water to Zhu Gui's tavern, strapped charms on his legs, and started rushing back to Jiangzhou Prefecture.

After a few days, he made it back home on time, and he went to check in with Prefect Cai. The prefect was delighted at his prompt completion of the mission and rewarded him with three cups of wine before taking the reply letter.

“Did you see my father?” Prefect Cai asked.

“Your servant only stayed one night there, so I did not see his lordship,” Dai Zong replied.

Prefect Cai opened the letter. The first part was just pleasantries and thank you for all the swag and so on, and the second half of the letter said the emperor wanted to see the rebel Song Jiang for himself, so put him in a prisoner cart and send him to the capital under guard right away. Oh and I’ll mention Huang Wenbing’s part in all this to the emperor at some point, so he’ll definitely get a government position.

Prefect Cai was delighted and rewarded Dai Zong with 25 taels of silver. He then ordered his men to prepare a prisoner cart. Dai Zong thanked him and went home, and then bought some meat and wine and went to check in on Song Jiang. He whispered in Song Jiang’s ear and told him what had transpired, and the news cheered up Song Jiang.

The next day, a friend invited Dai Zong out for drinks. As he was sitting in the tavern, someone from the prefectural office came by and summoned him to go meet the prefect again, so Dai Zong went.

“Thank you again for completing that mission,” the prefect said. “You handled it so well. I need to reward you properly.”

“I am your servant,” Dai Zong said, “so how would I dare to give anything but my best?”

Prefect Cai then said, “I’ve been so busy lately that I didn’t have a chance to ask you about your trip in detail. When you got to the capital, which gate did you enter the city through?”

Uhh ... well, Dai Zong had never actually been to the capital, so he had no idea what would make for a convincing lie.

“It was late when I arrived, so I didn’t see the name of the gate,” he said, trying to muddle his way through.

“Who greeted you at my residence? Where did you stay?”

“When I got to the premier’s residence, I found a doorman and he took the letter inside. A little while later, he came back out and took the hampers of gifts, and I went to stay at an inn. The next morning, I went back to the residence at 5 a.m. to await a reply. The doorman came out with the return letter. I was worried about missing the deadline, so I did not dare to ask him for details and just rushed back.”

“Ah, I see,” Prefect Cai said. “And how old was the doorman? Was he skinny and swarthy, or fair-skinned and plump? Was he tall or short? Did he have a beard?”

“It was dark when I got to the residence, and it was 5 a.m. when I went back the next day, so I didn’t get a good look. He seemed to be medium built. I think he had some whiskers.”

Suddenly, Prefect Cai flew into a rage and barked, “Guards, seize him!”

A dozen or so jailers rushed forward and wrestled Dai Zong to the ground.

“I’ve done nothing wrong!” he protested.

“You damn scoundrel!” Prefect Cai cursed. “My family’s former doorman, Grandpa Wang, has been dead for a few years now. The current doorman is Little Wang, a young boy, so why did you say he was an adult and had whiskers?! Also, the doorman is not allowed to go into the residence. When a letter arrives, he must give it to Secretary Zhang, who then gives it to Steward Li, who then notifies the family in their private quarters. Only then would the presents be accepted. And if a return letter is needed, it takes three days. So how could a confidant not have come out and asked you for details about those two hampers of gifts from me and instead just accepted them willy-nilly?! You fooled me in the moment yesterday. Now, tell me where you got this letter!”

Ok, let's hit pause real quick. So what gives? The prefect had fallen for the deception hook, line, and sinker yesterday, so what made him all the sudden decide to grill Dai Zong today? Well, let's rewind.

So, yesterday, after Dai Zong left, Prefect Cai had the prisoner cart prepared and was ready to send Song Jiang off to the capital in a day or two. Just then, Huang Wenbing came calling, so the prefect invited him into the private quarters, and Huang Wenbing came bearing gifts and seasonal fruits.

"You always bring me presents; you really shouldn't have," the prefect said.

"It's just some meager items from my rustic village, not worth your concern," Huang Wenbing replied.

"Oh, I must congratulate you," the prefect told him. "Honors will be coming your way soon."

"How does your lordship know?"

"Yesterday my messenger came back. The prisoner Song Jiang is to be sent to the capital, and your contribution will be reported to the emperor soon, and then you will be given a position for sure. It's all in my father's letter."

"In that case, I must thank your lordship for your immense kindness. And that messenger really IS a magical traveler."

"If you have any doubts about what I said, you can read the letter," Prefect Cai said. "It'll prove I'm not lying."

"Oh I would never dare to presume to read your lordship's private correspondence. But if you don't mind, then I WOULD like to see it."

"You're my good friend, so what's the problem?" Prefect Cai said as he told his attendants to bring the letter to Huang Wenbing.

Huang Wenbing read the letter once from start to finish. Then, he flipped it over and then took a look at the seal on the flap of the envelope. He noticed that the stamp had been made by a freshly cut seal.



Shaking his head, Huang Wenbing said, "This letter is a forgery."

"You're mistaken," Prefect Cai said. "It's in my father's handwriting. How can it be fake?"

"My lord, forgive me. In your usual correspondences with your father, has he used this seal?"

"Actually he hasn't; he just signs it by hand. He must've had the seal next to him this time, so he just stamped the envelope with it."

"My lord, please forgive me for appearing meddlesome, but you have been deceived. Right now, your father's calligraphy is one of the four styles that are popular across the land, so anyone can learn his handwriting. Also, this seal was from when your father became a member of the Hanlin (4,2) Academy. He put it on all his essays and calligraphy, so a lot of people have seen it. But now, he has risen to premier, so why would he use the old seal from his days in the Hanlin Academy? Besides, a letter from father to son does not require a seal. His lordship is a very learned man, so how could he have made that mistake? If your lordship don't believe me, you can question the messenger. Ask him whom he met at your father's residence. If he answers incorrectly, then this must be a fake. I'm not trying to meddle, but you have bestowed so much misplaced kindness on me that I had to speak up."

"Well, that's easy enough," the prefect said. "The messenger had not been to the capital before, so we'll be able to ascertain the truth by questioning him."

Fast forward back to the present, where we find Dai Zong being wrestled to the ground by the guards while the prefect was demanding to know why he lied about whom he met at the premier's residence.

"I was in a hurry and didn't see the man clearly," Dai Zong said, still trying to wiggle his way out of this mess.

"Bullcrap!" the prefect barked. "You damn scoundrel! You're not going to confess without a little pain, are you? Guards, beat him, hard!"

The jailers knew this was no laughing matter, so even though they were friends with Dai Zong, they couldn't worry about that now. They tied him up and started pelting him with their bamboo rods until his skin was split and he was covered in blood. Eventually, Dai Zong succumbed to the torture and confessed, sort of.

"This letter IS a fake," he admitted.

"How did you get it?"

"When I was passing through Liangshan Marsh, a group of bandits abducted me and took me up to their stronghold. They were going to cut out my heart. But then they found the letter. They took the hampers of gifts, but they spared my life. I knew that I couldn't go back home after that, so I begged them to kill me then and there. Instead, they wrote this letter for me to take back as a cover. I was afraid your lordship would punish me, so I lied to you."

"That sounds about right, but there's still some nonsense there," Prefect Cai said. "You were obviously in cahoots with the outlaws of Liangshan to steal my stuff, but instead you're feeding me this BS. Beat him again!"

The jailers resumed their caning, but Dai Zong refused to fess up about the real plan. After more torture failed to produce a different confession, Prefect Cai said, "No need to question him further. Put him in a big cangue and lock him up."

While the guards dragged Dai Zong off to prison, Prefect Cai returned to his quarters and thanked Huang Wenbing. "If it wasn't for your keen insights, I would've messed up a critical matter," he said.

Huang Wenbing replied, "It's obvious this man is in cahoots with Liangshan and planning a rebellion. If we don't eliminate him quickly, he will be trouble."

"Then let's take these two men's confessions and write up a case, and behead them in the marketplace," Prefect Cai said. "Then I will inform the court of what we've done."

“My lord, that is wise. For one thing, the court will be happy to hear of your service. Also, it preempts any attempt by the Liangshan bandits to stage a jailbreak.”

Prefect Cai then promised to personally recommend Huang Wenbing for a government post. They then shared wine and food before Huang Wenbing went home.

The next day, Prefect Cai presided over the courtroom and summoned the scribe.

“Hurry and write up the case report, and attach the confessions from Song Jiang and Dai Zong,” the prefect said. “Also, write the criminal convictions that will be posted publicly, so that the prisoners can be taken to the marketplace for their execution tomorrow. It’s always better to execute such rebels sooner than later. We must eliminate Song Jiang and Dai Zong now so as to prevent headaches later.”

Now, the scribe happened to be good friends with Dai Zong. With things as they were, he had no way to save his friend, so he did the only thing he could -- buy him a few extra days. He told Prefect Cai, “Tomorrow is a national day of mourning, and the day after tomorrow is Mid-Summer Ghosts Day. We cannot conduct executions on either day. And the day after that is a national holiday, so we must wait until five days from now before we can execute them.”

The prefect agreed. So on the morning of the sixth day, men were sent to sweep the execution ground at the city’s main intersection. After breakfast, the executioners and about 500 soldiers waited outside the jailhouse. Around 9 a.m., the warden went to the prefect and formally requested that he personally oversee the executions. The scribe now had no choice but to write up two placards, each with the character for “beheading”. And although all the jailers in the prison were on good terms with Song Jiang and Dai Zong, none could do anything for them now except lament their fate.

The two prisoners were then prepared for their executions. They were tied up, and their hair were glued into a pear-shaped bun, and a red paper flower was stuck into each bun. They were then led to an altar for the patron god of the prison, where they were each given a bowl of Eternal Rest Rice and a cup

of Forever Farewell Wine. After that, they were made to bow to the prison god, and cangues were placed around their necks. Once that was done, about 70 jailers marched them out of the jailhouse, with Song Jiang in front and Dai Zong right behind him. As they were escorted out, Song Jiang could only stamp his foot, while Dai Zong could do nothing but look down and sigh.

Outside the jailhouse, the streets were packed as more than 2,000 people had gathered to watch the executions. The executioners started chanting as the convoy brought the two prisoners to the execution ground at the marketplace. The area was surrounded by armed soldiers. The executioners made the prisoners sit down, with Song Jiang facing south and Dai Zong facing north. Then, they waited for noon to roll around, at which point the overseer would arrive and heads would roll.

As they waited for the main event, the crowd read the public notice listing the crimes of the condemned. It said, "Prisoner Song Jiang wrote a treasonous poem and spread sedition. He plotted with the outlaws of Liangshan to rebel. He is sentenced to death by beheading. Prisoner Dai Zong secretly delivered messages for Song Jiang. He also plotted with the outlaws of Liangshan to rebel. He is sentenced to death by beheading. The execution is being overseen by Prefect Cai of Jiangzhou."

All around, the crowd was antsy with anticipation, and there was much pushing and shoving as people jostled for the best view. For instance, on the east side of the marketplace, a band of snakecharmers shoved their way into the execution grounds to watch the proceedings. The guards tried to beat them off, but they won't leave. On the west side, a group of medicine peddlers also were trying to push their way in for a better view.

"Hey you!" the guards shouted at them. "Don't you know any better?! Where do you think you are? How dare you shove your way in here?"

But the medicine peddlers shot back, "Oh screw your damn podunk village. We've traveled everywhere. Even executions in the capital allow spectators. And here you are, making all this fuss about

beheading a couple random guys in your piss-ant town. What's the big deal with us coming in to have a look?!"

Seeing this chaos, Prefect Cai shouted to his men, "Don't let them in! Chase them away!"

But before his men could do that, there was more chaos on the south side of the execution ground, as a group of porters tried to walk across the intersection with their loads.

"Hey, where are you going with those?!" the soldiers barked.

"We are delivering things to the prefect's residence; how dare you stop us?" the porters said.

"Even if you're working for the prefect, you must take another route," the soldiers told them. But instead of taking a detour, the porters decided to just wait this thing out, and see some heads roll. So they put down their loads and stood and watched from the front of the crowd.

Meanwhile, a group of merchants pushing two carts were approaching the intersection from the north, and the soldiers stopped them as well.

"We're in a hurry to get on the road; let us through," the merchants demanded.

"We're having an execution here; how can we let you through?!" the soldiers replied. "If you're in a hurry, take a detour."

The merchants scoffed. "That's easy for you to say. We're from the capital. We don't know the damn roads around here. We can only take the main road."

But the soldiers refused to let them through, so the merchants stood at the front of the crowd and waited, complaining all the while. Geez, I guess it wasn't the smartest idea to have executions at the busiest intersection in the city.

Amid all this hubbub, though, noon was quickly approaching. To see how bad this day will get for Song Jiang and Dai Zong, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, the crowd-control issues escalate. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!