

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 60.

Last time, Song Jiang and Dai Zong survived a close brush with death, thanks to a last-minute rescue by the Liangshan bandits. But Song Jiang was not content to just run away with his head intact. He wanted revenge against Huang Wenbing, the guy who turned him in for his seditious poem in the first place and pushed the prefect to execute him sooner than later. All of Song Jiang's bandit friends were on board, so they planned a night attack on Huang Wenbing's town, which sat across the river from Jiangzhou Prefecture.

That night, around 7 p.m., the bandits' boats reached the shoreline by the town and settled in among the thick reeds. Soon, their scout boat came back and said that all was quiet in town. Song Jiang now ordered everyone to take the 90-some sacks of sand and earth and 100-some bundles of firewood that they had prepared. A few chieftains stayed behind to guard the boats, and everyone else armed themselves and rushed toward the wall.

When they were less than half a mile from the wall, Song Jiang told the men to release a pigeon wearing a bell. That was their signal. Momentarily, a bamboo pole with a white strip appeared atop the wall. This was the return signal, sent by the chieftain Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat, who had snuck into the town the day before. His job was to show them where Huang Wenbing's home was, since Huang Wenbing lived right by the wall.

Song Jiang now instructed the men to stack the sacks of sand against the wall, forming a makeshift ramp. They then used this the ramp to carry the firewood over the wall. Bai Sheng was waiting for them on the other side and pointed out the lane where Huang Wenbing's house was located. He also told them that two other undercover chieftains -- Xue (1) Yong (3) the Sick Tiger and Hou (2) Jian (4) the Long-Armed Ape -- had already slipped into Huang Wenbing's home and were waiting, and that two other chieftains -- Shi (2) Yong (3) the Stone General and Du Qian the Skyscraper -- were also in position by the town gates.

Song Jiang and company now headed to the front door of Huang Wenbing's home. There, they spotted Hou Jian the Long-Armed Ape under the eaves. Song Jiang called him over and whispered, "Go open the door to the vegetable garden next to the house and let our men put the firewood inside. Then have Xue Yong ignite them and go knock on Huang Wenbing's door and say the gentleman living next door had a fire break out in his home and needs to store some valuables here. Once they open their doors, I'll know what to do."

Hou Jian did as Song Jiang instructed, and soon smoke was billowing in the vegetable garden and Hou Jian was banging on the front door of Huang Wenbing's house, shouting, "The house next door is on fire, and they need to store their things here. Open up, quickly!"

The people inside heard him and got out of bed. They saw that indeed a fire had broken out just outside their wall, so they hurriedly opened the front door. As soon as the door swung open, Chao Gai, Song Jiang, and all the other chieftains let out a roar and stormed in, cutting down everyone they came across. Before long, all 50-some people in Huang Wenbing's household lay dead. So I guess when Song Jiang was telling everyone in the last episode that "My beef is with Huang Wenbing alone and no harm should come to any other soldiers or civilians," it was understood by all that the people in Huang Wenbing's household were guilty by association and excluded from the do-not-kill list, even though none of them probably had anything to do with what happened to Song Jiang.

And yet, despite slaughtering the entire household, our heroes missed the mark on the one guy they were really after -- Huang Wenbing himself. There was no sign of him. Oh well. We'll worry about that later. For now, our heroes helped themselves to all the gold and silver in the house, which the novel tells us all came from wicked Huang Wenbing's fleecing of the good people of the town, so it was ok that our bandit friends were now making off with this ill-gotten wealth. I mean, it seems like the honorable thing to do would be to leave it for the people of the town, but who am I to question our heroes' honor?

In any case, now loaded down with swag, our heroes sprinted back toward the wall. By now, the chieftains Shi Yong and Du Qian, who had been dressed as beggars and laying low near the gates of the town, had started killing the guards at the gate. Again, so much for the “This has nothing to do with the soldiers and civilians” edict. Meanwhile, a bunch of neighbors saw the fire and were rushing toward it with buckets and ladders to try to put it out, but Shi Yong and Du Qian cut them off and shouted, “You civilians, stop! There are thousands of us heroes from Liangshan here, and we have come to kill the wicked household of Huang Wenbing to avenge Song Jiang and Dai Zong. It has nothing to do with you. Go home right now and hide. Don’t come out here and meddle in things that are not your concern!”

Of course, one might argue that a fire breaking out in a town filled with wooden construction was everybody’s concern, and some of the neighbors were still standing around, not sure whether to heed the warning or not. But then, they saw Li Kui the Black Whirlwind whirling toward them with his twin war axes, and that was when everyone scrambled.

On the other end of the street, a few security guards were rushing toward the house with a group of men to try to put out the fire, but the chieftain Hua Rong nailed the first man in the group with an arrow and shouted, “Come put out the fire if you want to die!” And that was enough to send that group scurrying away as well. Left alone, the chieftain Xue Yong now started several more fires throughout Huang Wenbing’s residence, and soon, black smoke and raging flames roared toward the heavens.

By now, all the guards at the town gates had been killed. Li Kui cut the chain binding the gates shut with one swing of his axe and kicked the gates wide open. So half of the raiding party escaped through the gates, while the other half went out the same way they came in, over the wall. They loaded all their booty onto the boats and rowed away back toward the estate of the Mu brothers, who had just joined their ranks. No one inside the town dared to give chase, not after what they had seen happen a few days earlier on the other side of the river. The only regret for our heroes was that they did not catch Huang Wenbing, which, when this mission was being discussed, was supposedly their only objective.

So where was Huang Wenbing? Well, he was still on the other side of the river in the prefectural seat of Jiangzhou, talking with Prefect Cai. Needless to say, once the fire at his home was raging, the folks across the river noticed, and they quickly reported this to him. He hurriedly told the prefect, "My town is on fire; I have to go home right away to see if it's ok."

Prefect Cai immediately ordered his men to open the city gates and dispatch a government boat to take Huang Wenbing back across the river. As the boat rowed closer to the opposite bank, Huang Wenbing could see the river turning red from the reflection of the flames. The boatman told him, "Looks like the fire is limited to just the north gate." That, of course, made Huang Wenbing even more worried, since that's where his lived.

As they reached the middle of the river, they saw a small boat rowing across, followed a few moments later by another. This second boat, however, did not just pass them by. Instead, it appeared to be heading straight for Huang Wenbing's boat.

"Hey, who goes there?! How dare you get so close?!" Huang Wenbing's attendants shouted at the oncoming boat.

A man holding a long hook jumped up from that boat and answered, "I'm going to Jiangzhou to report the fire."

Huang Wenbing now stepped out of the cabin and asked, "What is on fire?"

"Mr. Huang's home by the north gate was raided by the Liangshan heroes. His entire household has been slaughtered, and all his property taken. And now his house is burning!"

That answer made Huang Wenbing spew a long string of laments. When the man in the oncoming boat heard this, he suddenly reached over with his hook, latched onto Huang Wenbing's boat, and leaped across. Sensing something wasn't right, Huang Wenbing quickly ran to the back of the boat and dove into the water. But no sooner had he plunged in did he feel someone grab him around the waist

and by the hair. A second later, he had been dragged out of the water and thrown into the cabin of his boat. And the man who had jumped across now tied him up.

As it turns out, the guy who jumped across was Li Jun (4) the River Dragon, and the guy who captured Huang Wenbing underwater was Zhang Shun, White Streak in the Waves. As the two heroes stood on Huang Wenbing's boat, the boatmen fell to their knees and begged for mercy.

"We won't kill you," Li Jun said. "We were just after Huang Wenbing. You guys can go back and tell that scoundrel Prefect Cai that we heroes of Liangshan will let him keep his damn head for now, but we'll come for it sooner or later."

Trembling, the boatmen promised time and again to deliver the message, and Li Jun and Zhang Shun took their captive over to their own boats and went on their way. They rowed to the Mu brothers' estate, where a row of chieftains were busy unloading their newly acquired booty. Everyone was delighted to hear that they had captured Huang Wenbing. Once Li Jun and Zhang Shun brought their prisoner on shore, everyone went inside the estate and sat down in the thatched parlor.

Song Jiang now had Huang Wenbing stripped and tied to a willow tree and asked all the chieftains to sit around in a circle. He then got a bottle of wine and offered a toast to each of the 30 heroes present. Once that was done, he turned his attention to Huang Wenbing.

"You scoundrel!" Song Jiang cursed. "I had never done anything to you. Why were you so dead set on seeing me dead that you told the prefect time and again to kill me? You are an educated man, so why were you doing such wicked things? It's not like I killed your parents, so why were you determined to do me in?! Your brother Huang Wenye (2,4) was born from the same womb as you, and yet look at how kind he is. I've long heard that everyone in your town calls him Buddha Huang. Last night, I did not do him any harm at all. But you, all you do is harm others, suck up to the powerful, and oppress good people. I know everyone in your town calls you Hornet Huang. Well, I'm going to pluck out your stinger today."

To all this, Huang Wenbing meekly replied, "I realize my error; I only pray for a quick death."

Chao Gai cut him off and barked, "You crook! Don't you worry about dying! Instead of having regrets today, you should've never committed your wicked deeds back then!"

Song Jiang now asked, "Which brother wants to do the honors for me?"

Li Kui, ever eager to take a life, jumped up and said, "I'll butcher this scoundrel for you, brother. He looks fat; he'll make for a good roast."

"Quite right," Chao Gai said. "Bring a sharp blade and a basin of charcoal fire. We'll slice bits and pieces off this bastard and roast them to go with our wine, so that my brother's anger can be alleviated."

And in case you thought they were just making stuff up to sound scary, think again. Li Kui picked up a sharp knife, looked at Huang Wenbing with a smirk, and said, "You bastard. You were always running your mouth in the prefect's private quarters, spewing lies and making up stuff to harm people. You are praying for a quick death? Ha! I'm going to kill you slowly."

He started with Huang Wenbing's legs, slicing off a chunky piece of flesh and putting it on the charcoal fire. Once it was done roasting, it was consumed with wine, and only then did Li Kui go back and slice off the next piece. And so it went, piece by piece. After just a few pieces, Huang Wenbing met his agonizing end. Only now did Li Kui cut open his chest, carve out his heart, and put it into a soup to help everyone sober up. And when this gruesome ceremony ended, all the heroes congratulated Song Jiang for getting his revenge.

So, I've been asked on occasion whether doing the podcast makes me see any aspects of the novel differently, and the answer I usually give is that rereading the book closely as an adult really brings to the fore the morally ambiguous nature of this novel, and this whole thing between Song Jiang and Huang Wenbing is kind of exhibit A for that. The narrative paints this as a case of the wicked Huang

Wenbing doing everything he could to frame Song Jiang for sedition for personal gain, so he got his just deserts. Yet, rereading this story now, I can't help but go, "Wait, hold on a sec." Sure Huang Wenbing turned Song Jiang in for writing a seditious poem, but the fact of the matter is, Song Jiang DID write a poem that had seditious undertones. I mean, he literally compared himself to a famous rebel and wrote about staining the river red. Sure we can talk about the issue of freedom of expression and how maybe it's unjust to persecute someone for merely writing a poem, but that's a separate issue. As far as I could see, Song Jiang was never advocating for the position of free speech. He never said it was wrong to write a seditious poem; he just maintained that he didn't write one. Well, Huang Wenbing and Prefect Cai certainly disagreed, and both of them immediately recognized the poem as being seditious on first sight. It wasn't like they had to go digging for a deeper subtext.

And then the second thing that Huang Wenbing did that was apparently so evil was linking Song Jiang to the children's rhyme that supposedly foretold trouble in the region. But here's the thing: Everything in that children's rhyme came true, and Song Jiang really did end up being the cause of death and destruction in the region.

And finally, Huang Wenbing was further vilified for seeing through the bandits' forged letter that was intended to save Song Jiang. But one has to wonder why that was so morally wrong. I mean, if you were on the side of the law and recognized an attempt by criminals to spring a prisoner, won't you say something?

So all in all, it doesn't take a lot of effort to view Huang Wenbing in a rather different light. Again, the only way you could argue that he was really in the wrong is if we say it shouldn't be a crime to write a poem that expresses thoughts of rebellion. But again, nobody in the novel was arguing that. So what we have here is a former government official recognizing a potentially serious crime, reporting that crime, and then helping to foil an attempt to abduct the person responsible for said crime. Sure, he might've been doing it all just for personal gain rather than out of a sense of justice or a desire to

protect society from the chaos of rebellion, but honestly, helping to apprehend a criminal would be among the least bad things that someone in this novel has done for personal gain.

And the guy he helped to arrest? Well, Song Jiang was a convicted criminal who had murdered his mistress to cover up his criminal connections and then fled from the law. And we're not even talking about the havoc he caused at Clear Winds Mountain, like devising a plan that involved slaughtering hundreds of innocent civilians for the sake of recruiting Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. And for all his protestations about how Huang Wenbing had unfairly tied him to the children's rhyme, again, Song Jiang pretty much made the predictions come true. Think about how many innocent civilians died during the bandits' rescue. And then there's the "don't harm innocent soldiers and civilians" revenge operation in which more innocent soldiers and civilians were slaughtered. So really, it seems that for Song Jiang and his bandit friends, the moral calculus of this whole situation just boiled down to, "That guy was a total ass!"

In any case, as far as Song Jiang and company were concerned, justice had been served, along with a few choice cuts of roasted human flesh. Song Jiang now prostrated in front of all the chieftains, and they hurriedly kneeled to him as well, telling him, "Brother, if you have something to say, just say it. How can we not listen?"

Song Jiang replied, "Even though I am untalented, I studied the classics as a youth. In my early adult years, I wished to meet the heroes of the land. Alas, my means were feeble and my talents few, so I could not fulfill my lifelong wish. When I was exiled to Jiangzhou, Chieftain Chao and all you heroes tried time and again to convince me to stay with you. But I refused on account of my father's stern instructions. And then heaven granted me a golden opportunity to meet many more heroes on my way to Sundown River. Who knew that my reckless drunken words almost cost Superintendent Dai his life as well. I am forever grateful that you all ignored so many dangers and came so deep into the mouth of a



tiger to save me and then helped me get revenge. We have caused a ruckus in two cities. Such a great offense will no doubt be reported to the imperial court. Today, I have no choice but to go to Liangshan and join Brother Chao Gai. Are you all willing to go with me? If so, then let's pack up and leave right away. If not, I will respect your wishes, but I fear that you will suffer the consequences for our actions, so please think it through."

Before Song Jiang even finished speaking, Li Kui, who makes it a point of pride to never think things through, jumped up and shouted, "We're all going! Anyone who doesn't go will get a taste of my axe and end up in two pieces!"

"Watch your crude language!" Song Jiang chided him. "All our brothers must come willingly."

Of course, everyone was of the same mind. They, too, recognized that the poop would soon hit the fan when word of what they've done reaches the imperial court, so they all said, "Where else would we go if we didn't follow you through thick and thin, brother?"

Song Jiang was delighted and thanked everyone. That very day, they sent the chieftains Zhu Gui and Song Wan on ahead to let the folks on Liangshan know that there was company coming. Then, they split up into five groups, totaling 28 chieftains and traveling about six or seven miles apart. They divided the booty from Huang Wenbing's house and loaded all of it onto carts. The Hong brothers gathered up their family and property as well. Among the workhands on the estate, those who were not willing to become bandits were given some money and sent to seek another master. Those who were willing to go joined the traveling party. After the first four groups set out, Mu Hong put his estate to the torch, leaving behind his fields and heading out for Liangshan. I could just imagine Old Squire Mu going, "Wait, you're doing what now?!" just before he was hustled into a carriage.

Traveling in the first group were five chieftains: Chao Gai, Song Jiang, Hua Rong, Dai Zong, and Li Kui. After being on the road for three days, they came upon a location called Yellow Gate Mountain. Looking

up from his saddle, Song Jiang said to Chao Gai, "This mountain looks quite treacherous. Could there be a big gang of bandits in there? We should tell the other groups to come up and we'll cross this place together."

Just then, drums and gongs rang out from the mouth of the path up the mountain.

"See? Just as I expected," Song Jiang said. "Let's hold up and wait for our people to catch up so we can take them on."

So Hua Rong readied his bow and arrow, Chao Gai and Dai Zong gripped their long-handle broadswords, and Li Kui brandished his war axes as they all protected Song Jiang. As they moved forward, they saw about 500 bandits appear from behind a hill, led by four chieftains, all armed.

These four chieftains shouted, "You all caused a ruckus in Jiangzhou and raided the town across the river, killing numerous soldiers and civilians. And now you're going home to Liangshan? We've been waiting for you. If you're smart, then leave Song Jiang here, and we'll spare you."

Hearing this, Song Jiang rode out and kneeled in front of them, saying, "I am Song Jiang. I was framed and unjustly condemned with no recourse. Thankfully, heroes from all corners of the realm came to rescue me. I don't know how I offended you heroes, but I hope you can spare my life."

When they saw Song Jiang kneeling, all four chieftains on the other side hurriedly dismounted, tossed aside their weapons, ran toward Song Jiang, and kneeled, saying, "We four have only ever heard of Song Jiang the Timely Rain. We never dared to even hope for a chance to meet you in person. We heard you ran into legal trouble in Jiangzhou and we were talking about going to break you out of prison. But we didn't have any firm information. Then, the day before yesterday, we sent a scout to Jiangzhou, and he reported back that many heroes raided Jiangzhou and stormed the execution ground to save you, and then they burned Huang Wenbing's town and slaughtered his household. We figured you would be coming this way, so we sent scouts to keep an eye on the roads. We weren't sure about our intel, hence our deceptive words just now. Please forgive us for offending you. We are lucky to get

to meet you today. We have prepared some weak wine and crude food in our humble fort to welcome you. Please come with us for just a short while.”

Oh great! Another group of heroes who were planning to save me days after my scheduled execution. Thanks guys. I guess it’s the thought that counts. Anyway, Song Jiang was delighted as he helped the four men to their feet and asked for their names. Their leader was named Ou (1) Peng (2). He had been a military guard on the Yangzi River, but he ran afoul of his superior officer, so he deserted and turned brigand. Through his deeds on the jianghu scene, he earned the nickname “Golden Wings Brushing the Clouds.” The No. 2 guy was named Jiang (3) Jing (4). He was a scholar who failed to pass the imperial exam, so he turned from books to weapons. He was very clever and very good with numbers and calculations. He was also adept at weapons and battle formations, so everyone called him the Divine Mathematician. This was obviously back when being good at math was a rarity in China. The third guy was named Ma (3) Lin (2). He was an idler who was skilled at playing the double flute. He was also so handy with a pair of bronze sabers that no enemy could get close to him. He boasted the nickname the Iron Flute Deity. And the fourth guy was named Tao (2) Zongwang (1,4). He used to be a tenant farmer, so it’s no surprise that his weapon of choice was an iron spade, though he could also handle spears and knives, and he was very strong. For that, people called him the Nine-Tailed Turtle.

After the introductions, the four bandit chieftains welcomed their new friends with fruit, wine, and two big platters of meat right there on the road. They first offered these to Chao Gai and Song Jiang, and then to the other three Liangshan chieftains in their group -- Hua Rong, Dai Zong, and Li Kui. After they sat by the roadside drinking and eating for a couple hours, the second group of Liangshan heroes arrived, and that prompted more introductions and toasts. The chieftains from Yellow Gate Mountain now invited the Liangshan outlaws to their stronghold, where they prepared a feast and sent bandit lackeys to go back to the foot of the mountain and welcome the ensuing groups of Liangshan outlaws as

they came down the road. Within half a day, the other three groups had all arrived, and they gathered in the main hall.

As they feasted, Song Jiang said to his hosts, "Right now I am joining up with Brother Chao Gai on Liangshan. Are you heroes willing to leave this place and come with us?"

All four heroes replied as one, "If you two men of honor do not spurn us, then we are willing to serve as your grooms."

And so everybody was happy. After spending the night on Yellow Gate Mountain, they all prepared to head out. The original five groups from Liangshan set off first, and the four chieftains from Yellow Gate Mountain packed up their valuables, rounded up 500 lackeys, and burned their stronghold to the ground. They then set out as the sixth group in the convoy. Their addition made Song Jiang quite happy, and he said to Chao Gai on the road, "Even though I had some close calls during my travels on the jianghu scene, I got to meet so many heroes, and now they're all following you to Liangshan. From now on, I have no choice but to follow you through thick and thin, with all my heart."

To see what's going to happen once Song Jiang and all these new guys get to Liangshan, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang has some loose ends to tie up, and of course it doesn't go according to plan. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!