

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 61.

Last time, Song Jiang and company caused not one but two ruckuses in the Jiangzhou area before setting off for Liangshan. On the way, they met up with four new heroes who, like everybody else, worshipped the ground that Song Jiang walked on, so they also decided to join the gang on Liangshan. Soon, all the chieftains old and new had arrived at the tavern run by Zhu Gui as a reconnaissance station for Liangshan.

Now, when Chao Gai went off the mountain to go save Song Jiang, he left only six chieftains behind to mind the shop: Wu Yong the military strategist, Gongsun Sheng the Daoist priest, Lin Chong the Panther Head, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, and the two craftsmen they had invited slash abducted to make the forged letter -- Xiao (1) Rang (4) and Jin (1) Dajian (4,1). These guys had gotten advance notice that the mission was successful and that the whole gang, plus a bunch of new friends, were on their way back. So that day, when they heard the group had arrived at the tavern, they sent lackeys down to Golden Sand Beach to welcome them with drums and flutes. The returning heroes went up to the stronghold on horseback and in sedan chairs. In the Hall of Honor, Wu Yong and company had laid out wine and a pot of incense to welcome them back.

Chao Gai didn't beat around the bush. He immediately asked Song Jiang to take the top command chair and serve as the new leader of Liangshan. But Song Jiang absolutely refused.

"Brother, you're mistaken!" he told Chao Gai. "It's only thanks to all of you risking your lives that mine was saved. Brother, you are the leader, how can you give it up to a no-talent hack like me? If you keep insisting on this, then I would rather die."

"Brother, why do you say that?" Chao Gai replied. "If it weren't for you risking your life to save me and my six brothers, how could we be where we are today? You are the great benefactor of this fortress. If you won't lead it, then who?"

But Song Jiang retorted, "If we go by age, you are 10 years older than me. If I sat in the top chair, I would be so embarrassed."

After much back and forth, Song Jiang prevailed and Chao Gai agreed to remain as leader. Song Jiang then assumed the No. 2 position, with Wu Yong at No. 3, and Gongsun Sheng at No. 4. As for the rest, given all the new faces, Song Jiang had a suggestion.

"Let's not worry about who has rendered the most service," he said. "All the original chieftains from Liangshan should sit on the left side as hosts, and all the new chieftains should sit on the right side as guests. Then, as all of you render service, then we can worry about rankings."

Everyone agreed, so on the left side sat nine chieftains: Lin Chong the Panther Head, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil, the three Ruan brothers, then the three original original chieftains Du Qian, Song Wan, and Zhu Gui, and finally Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat. So these were members of Chao Gai's little gang, plus the three holdover chieftains who were here before Chao Gai took over as leader in what everyone now remembers as a most honorable and peaceful transition. On the right side sat 27 chieftains who had arrived later, according to the order in which they joined and their age. And no, I'm not going to name them all. The novel loves these lists of names, but I don't think you really want me to rattle off an ever-growing litany of names every other episode. In any case, Liangshan now boasted 40 chieftains in all, and they celebrated and drank to their hearts' content that day.

As they feasted, Song Jiang again recounted to everyone how Huang Wenbing was to blame for all his recent travails. "That knave was meddling in things that weren't his business," Song Jiang said. "He spewed a bunch of nonsense to the prefect of Jiangzhou, saying that a children's rhyme was predicting that I would be staging a rebellion in Shandong Province. That's why they arrested me. And then, when Superintendent Dai delivered the fake letter, it was again that Huang Wenbing who tipped off the

prefect and suggested that he execute us first and inform the court later. If you heroes had not saved me, how could I have ended up here?!”

Hearing that, Li Kui jumped up and shouted, “Good brother, you have done as heaven foretold. Even though you suffered a bit, I had some fun carving up that crook Huang Wenbing. We’ve got lots of troops, SO WHAT if we do rebel? Brother Chao Gai can be the big emperor, Brother Song Jiang can be the little emperor, Professor Wu will be the prime minister, and Priest Gongsun can be the imperial wizard. And the rest of us can all be generals. We’ll attack the capital and take that damn throne and live the high life. Won’t that be better than this damn swamp?”

Dai Zong quickly shushed him, saying, “Iron Ox, stop your nonsense! Now that you’re here, you can’t act up like you did back in Jiangzhou. You must obey Brother Chao and Brother Song’s commands, and you cannot spew nonsense. If you mouth off again, we’ll cut off your head as a warning.”

“What?! If you cut off my head, when would I grow another one? I guess I better just stick to drinking.”

And at that, everybody had a good laugh. Though honestly, it seems like Li Kui was either the only one to recognize the irony of what Song Jiang had said or the only willing to call a spade a spade.

Song Jiang now moved on to the topic of Liangshan’s previous battles against government troops. “When I first heard about that, I was quite alarmed,” he said. “Who knew that it would be my turn now.”

Wu Yong chimed in and said, “Brother, if you had listened to us and just stayed here instead of going to Jiangzhou, it would’ve saved you a lot of trouble. But all is ordained by heaven.”

Song Jiang then asked about the commander of the previous army that had tried to attack Liangshan. That army, if you still remember episode 29, was obliterated, and their commander was captured. Wu Yong told Song Jiang that the guy died of illness after just a couple months, which made Song Jiang sigh in lament for some reason. I guess maybe it’s because they were colleagues back home?

After the feast ended, Chao Gai arranged for quarters for the Mu brothers' family. They then split up the booty from Huang Wenbing's house, rewarding the lackeys who contributed. Next, they brought out those two hampers of presents that Dai Zong was supposed to deliver to the capital along with the letter from Prefect Cai. Since Dai Zong came here instead of going to the capital, they had stashed the hampers here for the time being. They now gave them back to Dai Zong, but he refused to accept them and instead added them to the stronghold's stores for all to use. So once again, another shipment of birthday presents of the premier ended up in Liangshan's coffers. Chao Gai then ordered all the lackeys to pay their respects to the new chieftains. After that, they started building more houses for all the newcomers, and multiple days of feasting followed.

During the feast on the third day after his arrival, Song Jiang rose and said to everyone, "I have one more important matter that I want to present to you. I must take a trip. I'll be gone for a few days. Will you allow me to go?"

"Brother, where do you want to go? What is this important matter?" Chao Gai asked.

"Thanks to your rescue, I am here, feasting every day and enjoying life," Song Jiang said, "but what about my father? Right now, Jiangzhou has sent a report to the capital, and the authorities will surely send word to Jizhou Prefecture and to Yuncheng County to order the arrest of my family. I fear for my father's safety. I'm thinking about moving him here so as to prevent any future worries. Will you all allow me to do so?"

Chao Gai said, "Brother, that is an important part of being a proper son. Of course we can't just be enjoying life here while letting your father suffer. So how could we deny you that request? It's just that our brothers have labored hard for many days and our troops are unsettled. Let's wait a couple more days, and then we'll mobilize our forces and go bring your father here."

But Song Jiang said, “Dear brother, I just worry about the authorities arresting my family once the report from Jiangzhou reaches the capital. We must not delay. And we don’t need a whole lot of people for this. I can just slip back home alone, and together with my brother Song Qing, we can move my father here without anyone knowing. On the other hand, if we bring a lot of people, it might startle other folks in the village and end up causing more trouble.”

“But if you run into mishaps on the way, there would be no one to save you,” Chao Gai objected.

“For the sake of my father, I would die without regret,” Song Jiang replied, which yeah is very admirable and all that, but it’s not like there’s no middle ground between mobilizing a whole army and having you, a fresh fugitive who’s wanted across the land, travel alone. Still, Song Jiang insisted on going by himself, and after much fruitless pleading, Chao Gai relented. So Song Jiang put on a broad-brimmed hat, took a short staff, and wore a short broadsword around his waist, and set out for Yuncheng County.

After traveling through the night and the next day, Song Jiang approached his family’s village as evening descended. It was, however, still far enough away that he had to stay at an inn that night. The next day, he reached the village, but it was still light out, so he hid in the woods outside the village until it was dark, and then he snuck into the village, went to his family’s estate, and knocked on the front door.

A moment later, the door opened and out stepped his younger brother Song Qing. Song Qing was quite startled to see him and said in a panic, “Brother, what are you doing here?!”

“I came to get you and our father.”

“Brother, what you did in Jiangzhou is common knowledge here now. Our county assigned two constables, the Zhao (4) brothers, to come keep an eye on us every day. They’re just waiting for the paperwork to arrive from Jiangzhou, and then they’ll arrest me and father while they hunt for you. There

are a couple hundred local militiamen on patrol around here day and night. You must not delay. Go back to Liangshan and get all the chieftains to come save us.”

When Song Jiang heard that, he was so shocked that he was covered in cold sweat. Yeah, who could’ve seen this coming, right? It’s not like anybody on Liangshan warned him to not come alone. Song Jiang did not dare to even set foot inside the house. He just turned and ran back in the direction of Liangshan. It was a dark and cloudy night, making it hard to see the roads. Song Jiang just picked whichever backroad appeared to be the least traveled, hoping to slip away undetected.

After running for about two hours, he suddenly heard loud cries behind him. He turned and saw a bunch of torches less than a mile away, accompanied by shouts of “Song Jiang, stop!”

Song Jiang turned and kept running. As he ran, he thought to himself, “I didn’t listen to Chao Gai’s advice, and now I’ve really run into disaster. Oh heaven, please take pity and save me!”

In the distance, he saw what seemed like a potential hiding place, so he ran in that direction. A few moments later, a gust of wind parted the clouds and let the moonlight through. Only now did Song Jiang recognize the road he was on, and it immediately drew an “Oh crap!” from him.

As it turns out, he was running toward a place called Circular Road Village. It was so named because -- get this -- there was only one road in and out of the village, and it just looped around the village and came right back out to the same spot where you entered. Aside from this path, the village was surrounded by towering cliffs with a stream at their feet and no other way in or out. So if you were literally on the run from the law, this was NOT the place to go. Song Jiang thought about backtracking, but it was too late. His pursuers were already coming down the path, cutting off any retreat.

Song Jiang had no choice but to sprint into the village and look for some spot that might offer a hiding place. As he passed through a grove, he saw an ancient temple that looked to be long neglected. He pushed open the doors, slipped inside, and began looking for a place to hide. But he searched

everywhere and didn't see a good spot. He was panicking when suddenly, he heard voices outside saying, "He must have run into that temple!"

Song Jiang recognized that voice as Zhao (4) Neng (2), one of the two Zhao brothers who were the constables leading the men currently chasing him. They were also the guys who arrested him last time, and as Song Jiang mentioned back then, these two had no special connection with him, so unlike, say, Zhu Tong and Lei Heng, they were not going to do the "gosh darn where could he have gone" thing.

Trapped like a rat, Song Jiang saw no option except the shrine, even though it was not really much of a hiding place. But at least he could be out of sight for a few seconds. So he lifted up the curtain to the shrine, ducked inside, put away his short staff, and curled up behind the idol, not daring to even breathe.

No sooner had he done this did the temple doors open and torches created pockets of light in the darkness of the temple. Song Jiang peeked out from behind the idol and saw the two Zhao brothers leading about 50 men, pointing their torches in various directions as they searched the place.

"I'm trapped!" Song Jiang muttered to himself silently. "Oh Spirits of the Nether Region defend me!"

As he prayed to every deity possible, the soldiers walked past his hiding spot one by one, and nobody stopped to take a look inside the shrine.

"This is a blessing from heaven," Song Jiang thought.

But just then, the other constable, Zhao De (2), pointed his torch toward the shrine.

"I'm going to get caught for sure!" Song Jiang lamented again in silence.

Zhao De now used the broadsword in one hand to lift up the curtain to the shrine while moving the torch up and down to take a closer look. But as he did so, the torch knocked loose a piece of soot, and it fell right into his eyes. Shutting his eyes, Zhao De threw his torch to the ground and stomped it out as he stumbled out of the shrine.

Standing in the main hall, he said to his men, "That knave isn't in here. But there's no other way out, so where could he have gone?"

The soldiers said, "He probably ran into some woods in the village. We don't need to worry about him getting away. This is called Circular Road Village. This is the only way out. Even though there are high peaks and woods around, there are no paths going up. We just need to guard the entrance to the village, and he won't be able to escape even if he grew wings. Then, once it gets light out, we can search the village closely."

Zhao De agreed and started to lead the soldiers out of the temple. Meanwhile, Song Jiang was breathing a silent sigh of relief, thinking to himself, "The gods have blessed me. If I can hang on to my life, I promise to restore this temple and rebuild the shrine."

But before he was done offering bribes to Jesus, Allah, and Buddah, a few soldiers suddenly shouted from the entrance to the temple, "Constable, he IS in there!" And that prompted the whole group to turn around.

"What rotten luck!" Song Jiang thought, doing yet another 180. "I'm going to get caught for sure!"

"Where is he?" one of the constables asked from the front of the temple.

"Look!" the soldiers said. "There are two handprints on the dusty temple door. He must have pushed open the door just now and slipped inside."

"Quite right. Let's go take a closer look."

So the whole group came back into the temple and started searching. Song Jiang again bemoaned his fate. "My life is so crossed! This time I'm doomed!"

The soldiers searched the whole place closely, and by process of elimination, they closed in on the shrine.

"He's most likely in the shrine," Zhao Neng said to his brother. "You didn't look closely enough last time. Let me go take a look."



So, as a soldier held out a torch, Zhao Neng lifted up the curtain, and about five or six guys all poked their heads in to look. But at that very moment, a violent gale suddenly kicked up inside the shrine, blowing out all the torches and leaving everyone in a darkness so black that they couldn't see each other, much less the fugitive hiding behind the idol.

"Well this is damn strange," Zhao Neng said. "Where did that wind come from? The spirit inside the shrine must be mad about us disturbing it with our torches, so it sent that wind to show its displeasure. Let's go. We just need to guard the entrance to the village and then come back and search in the morning."

But his brother Zhao De said, "We still haven't gotten a good look at the shrine yet. Let's poke in there with a spear and see."

"Sounds good," Zhao Neng agreed. So the two of them stepped toward the shrine again. But just then, another violent gale blew out from the shrine. This time, it was so strong that sand and pebbles went flying and made the whole structure shake on its foundations. A black cloud enveloped everything, and an icy chill crept in, making everyone's hair stand up on end.

"Brother, let's get out of here! The spirits are pissed!" Zhao Neng shouted. So the whole group sprinted out of the temple in such a panic that a few of them even tripped or twisted an ankle. When they ran outside the temple compound, they heard someone shouting "Have mercy!" from inside. So Zhao Neng went back in and saw that a few soldiers had tripped and fallen down the steps, and their clothing had gotten snagged on some tree roots. They couldn't break free, and in their terror, they had thrown away their broadswords and were now screaming for mercy from the spirits while yanking on their clothes. All of this had Song Jiang doubled over trying to muffle his laughter.

Zhao Neng helped those few hapless soldiers get themselves untangled and they scurried out of the temple. Now, a few of the first soldiers to run away said, "This spirit is so powerful. All your poking

around inside made the ghost lackeys act up. Let's just go guard the entrance to the village. Song Jiang won't be able to slip away."

The constables agreed, and the whole group finally set off back toward the entrance to the village.

Once they had departed, Song Jiang, still hiding in the shrine, thought, "Even though they didn't catch me, how am I going to get out of the village?"

On that question, he was stumped. But just then, he heard more stirring outside as footsteps approached from the rear portico. "Ah crap! I should've left when I had the chance," Song Jiang thought.

Just then, he heard two voices that sounded like a couple of young acolytes, coming from just outside the shrine.

"Starlord, our queen has sent us to invite you to go speak with her."

Huh? What? Queen? Starlord? Song Jiang did not dare to reply. After a moment, the voices outside said again, "Starlord Song, you have been invited by our queen. Please come."

When Song Jiang still gave no answer, the voices repeated, "Starlord Song, please do not hesitate. Our queen has been waiting for a long time."

From the tone of the voices, Song Jiang deduced that whoever were outside were girls rather than men. Mustering his courage, he ducked out from under the idol and was immediately startled to see two young girl acolytes dressed in green, standing by the shrine. But he quickly realized that they were just clay figures.

Just then, two voices from outside the shrine said again, "Starlord Song, you have been invited by our queen."

Song Jiang parted the curtains and stepped out of the shrine, and there, he was greeted by two real girl acolytes, dressed in green and with hair piled in spirals on their heads. Song Jiang took a closer look and noticed that these girls had an appearance that seemed otherworldly.

"Fairy maids," he said to them, "where did you come from?"

"Starlord, we are here at our queen's decree to invite you to her palace."

"You must be mistaken," Song Jiang said. "My name is Song Jiang. I'm not any starlord."

"There's no mistake," the girls replied. "Starlord, please come. Our queen has been waiting."

"What queen?" Song Jiang asked. "And anyway, I don't know her, so I dare not go see her."

"Starlord, you will understand when you get there. No need for so many questions."

"And where is your queen?"

"Just in the palace out back."

Wait ... palace? ... Out back? The two girls now began to lead the way, and Song Jiang followed them to a door in a corner of the temple wall.

"Starlord, come in through this door," the girls beckoned.

Song Jiang followed them through the door and was in for a surprising sight. The skies were lit up with stars and a bright moon, and everywhere, he saw trees and bamboo whose leaves rustled in a fragrant breeze that scented the air.

"Who knew this place was back here?!" Song Jiang thought to himself. "I should've been hiding here. Then I won't have suffered such a fright."

As he followed the girls, he found himself walking down a cobblestone path lined on both sides by huge pine trees that were so thick that a person could not wrap their arms around one.

"I wouldn't have expected such a nice path behind that old temple," he thought.

After less than half a mile, Song Jiang heard the babbling of a brook. Up ahead, he saw a blue stone bridge with red railings. Both banks were covered with exotic plants, ancient pine trees, lush bamboos, emerald willows, and enchanting peach trees. Under the bridge flowed a stream with water that glimmered like silver snow, flowing toward a stone cave. After he crossed the bridge, he was greeted by two rows of strange looking trees, flanking a large red gate. Once he walked through the gate, Song Jiang saw a beautiful palace up ahead, with green roof tiles, columns decorated with carvings of dragons, vermillion walls, and countless willows and flowers.

"I've spent my whole life in Yuncheng County, and I never heard about this place," he thought to himself. He was starting to get a little spooked and did not dare to go forward, but eventually did so at the behest of the two girls.

Once they went through the palace gates, he saw a magnificent courtyard flanked on both sides by crimson pillars draped with embroidered curtains. Straight ahead was a huge hall, festooned with glowing candles and lanterns.

The two girls led Song Jiang through the courtyard and up the steps to the terrace in front of the hall. There, a couple other girls dressed in green said to him, "Starlord, her highness invites you to go in."

Song Jiang couldn't help but tremble and feel his hair standing up on end as he walked over the flagstones covered with designs of dragon and phoenix. The girls parted the curtains around a dais and said, "Starlord Song is waiting outside."

Song Jiang now dropped to his knees on the steps in front of the dais and said, "I am a lowly commoner who has never seen the Celestial One. I beg your heavenly mercy and forgiveness."

A voice spoke up from behind the curtains, offering him a seat, but Song Jiang did not even dare to lift up his head. The voice now instructed the four girls to help Song Jiang up and to his seat, so he had

no choice but to sit down. Then, the voice called for the curtains to be raised, so the girls rolled up the bead curtains and hung them on golden hooks.

“Starlord, how have you been?” the figure behind the curtains asked.

Song Jiang quickly rose to his feet, bowed again, and replied, “I am but a commoner, and dare not look upon your holy countenance.”

“Starlord, you are already here, so there is no need to stand on formality,” the figure said.

Only now did Song Jiang dare to lift up his head and look. To find out what he saw, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, exactly how is Song Jiang going to get out of this mess? Join us next time. Thanks for listening!