

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 69.

Last time, after killing his wife in a most gruesome fashion, Yang Xiong set out with his hetero life mate Shi Xiu and their new grave-robber buddy Shi (2) Qian (1) to join up with the outlaws of Liangshan. On their way, they stayed at an inn near a place called the Zhu (4) Family Manor. While there, Shi Qian decided to steal and cook the house rooster for dinner.

Soon, though, the clerk at the inn discovered what happened, and he confronted the three men.

“Sirs, how can you do this?!” he said. “How could you steal our rooster and eat it?!”

“What?!” Shi Qian protested. “We bought this chicken on the way here. When the hell did we ever see your rooster?!”

“Then what happened to my rooster?”

“Got dragged off by a cat? Eaten by a weasel? Carried away by a hawk? How would I know?” Shi Qian scoffed.

“The rooster was in a cage!” the incredulous clerk shouted. “If you didn’t steal it, who did?”

Shi Xiu, trying to make peace and retain some right to call himself an honorable man, now intervened and said to the clerk, “Let’s not argue anymore. How much could it be worth? We’ll just pay you.”

“That rooster heralds the dawn; our inn can’t do without it!” the clerk said. “Even if you gave me 10 taels of silver, it won’t be enough. I want you to return my rooster.”

But now, Shi Xiu was getting pissed. “Who are you trying to fool? And if I don’t pay you? What then?!”

The clerk chuckled and said, “Sirs, don’t be stirring up trouble here! This is not like other inns. We’ll arrest you, take you to our master’s house, and then they’ll turn you in as bandits from Liangshan for a reward.”

If that was meant to quiet Shi Xiu, it had the exact opposite effect.

“Well, turns out we ARE heroes from Liangshan!” he raged. “Let me see how you’re going to arrest us and claim a reward!”

Yang Xiong was also getting angry, and he chimed in. “We were trying to be nice and compensate you. But even if we didn’t, how are you going to arrest us?”

“Thief! Thief!” the clerk screamed when he saw things coming to a head.

At that, four or five half-naked, stout men stomped in and charged toward Yang Xiong and company. But Shi Xiu needed just a few punches to knock them all down. The clerk was just about to scream some more, but Shi Qian gave him a hard slap across the face, leaving his cheek so swollen that he couldn’t make a sound. Meanwhile, the men that Shi Xiu had beaten up scrambled to their feet and fled out the back door.

Great, so petty theft had just turned into aggravated assault.

“Brothers, they must be going to get reinforcements,” Yang Xiong said. “Let’s finish our meal and leave!”

So, I love that instead of leaving right away, they decided to stay and finish the food first. The three of them made quick work of the rice and chicken, and then they got their stuff and each took a long-handle broadsword from the weapons rack. But Shi Xiu wasn’t quite ready to leave yet.

“A henchie is a henchie, we can’t let any of them off,” he said. He then grabbed a bundle of straws, lit them in the stove, and set the thatched building on fire. The wind was blowing, and within minutes, the inn was engulfed in flames.

So now, petty theft had turned into aggravated assault plus arson. This was going well.

While the inn burned, the three men stomped off along the main road. They traveled for a few hours, but suddenly saw countless torches approaching from in front and behind in the darkness. There were maybe 200 workhands shouting and chasing them.

“Don’t panic; let’s take the backroads,” Shi Xiu said.

“Wait!” Yang Xiong said. “Let’s kill whoever comes near, and wait until day break before we travel on.”

Oh great! So now petty theft was turning into murder. Good going guys. Anyway, their pursuers were closing in by now, so Yang Xiong took the lead, with Shi Qian in the middle and Shi Xiu bringing up the rear. The first wave of workhands charged forward with spears and staffs, but before they knew it, Yang Xiong had already cut down six or seven of them. That sent the rest scurrying away, but Shi Xiu caught up to them and cut down another six or seven, which just seemed a little excessive. I mean, they were already running away.

Word of this massacre quickly reached the rest of the workhands, and they figured that you know what, we can live without a rooster after all, so they all ran away.

Yang Xiong and company now resumed their escape. But as they were walking down a back road, loud cries suddenly rose up again, and before they could react, from within the tall grass on both sides of the road, two long hooks poked out and grabbed hold of Shi Qian. Before he could struggle, he had been pulled into the grass and disappeared. Shi Xiu was just about to go after Shi Qian, but from behind came two more hooks aimed at him. Thankfully, Yang Xiong was quick with the broadsword and knocked the hooks away. He then poked his blade into the grass, and heard a painful cry, and then they heard men scurrying off.

Having lost Shi Qian and surrounded by potential booby traps, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu did not dare to linger, nor could they worry about their captured companion right now. Instead, they just searched frantically for a way out. In the distance, they saw countless torches, and there were no woods along the

back roads for them to hide in. So they just kept running wherever the roads led, heading east all the while. Eventually, they managed to shake their pursuers.

As dawn approached, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu passed a village tavern and decided to go in for some refreshments and directions. They sat down and asked the waiter to bring out some wine while they cooked some rice. Just as they were about to eat, they saw a big man run in. He had a broad, square face, bright eyes, and a rough and ugly appearance. He wore a tea-brown robe, a head scarf, a white silk waist sash, and oiled leather boots.

“His lordship wants those loads delivered to his manor right away,” he said to the tavern keeper.

“It’s all been put on shoulder poles and will be delivered shortly,” the tavern keeper answered quickly.

“Alright, make it quick,” the big man said as he turned to leave. As he passed Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu’s table, Yang Xiong looked up and recognized him.

“My friend, what are you doing here? Did you not see me?” Yang Xiong called out in surprise.

The big guy turned, looked at him, and immediately called out, “Benefactor! What brings you here?!”

As he spoke, the man fell to his knees and kowtowed to Yang Xiong. Yang Xiong helped him up and introduced him to Shi Xiu.

“This brother’s name is Du (4) Xing (1). Because he has a rough appearance, everyone calls him Demon Face. Last year he went to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture to do some business. During a disagreement he killed a traveler in his group and was taken to court. I started talking to him and realized he knew a lot about fighting skills, so I saved him from his legal troubles. I didn’t expect to meet him here today.”

Du Xing now asked Yang Xiong how he came to be here. Yang Xiong whispered in his ear, “I killed someone in Jizhou, and we’re on our way to join the bandits on Liangshan. Last night we stayed at the

Zhu (4) Family Inn. One of my companions, Shi Qian, stole their rooster and we got into an argument with the clerk. In the heat of the moment, we burned their inn. The three of us were fleeing, but they caught up to us. We killed a few of them, but then they hooked Shi Qian and caught him. The two of us fled here and were just about to ask for directions. Who knew I would meet you.”

Du Xing now said, “Benefactor, don’t [panic. I’ll get them to release Shi Qian back to you.”

Hearing that, Yang Xiong asked Du Xing to join them for a drink and talk. As they sat down and drank, Du Xing said, “After I left Jizhou, thanks to your kindness, I ended up here. A local lord took a liking to me and took me into his home as a steward. And now, I am responsible for all his accounting. Since he trusts me so much, I haven’t thought about going back home.”

“Who is this lord?” Yang Xiong asked.

“So, in front of the Lone Dragon Ridge, there are three other ridges, each with a village on it,” Du Xing explained. “The one in the center is the Zhu Family Manor. On the west side sits the Hu (4) Family Manor. On the east side is the Li (3) Family Manor. Among them, these three villages total almost 20,000 troops. But the Zhu family is the strongest. Their patriarch is called Zhu Chaofeng (2,4). He has three sons, known as the Three Zhu Warriors. The eldest is called Zhu Long (2), the middle son is Zhu Hu (3), and the third son is Zhu Biao (1).”

Oh and by the way, the eldest son’s given name meant dragon, the middle son’s name meant tiger, and the youngest son’s name meant Asian golden cat. So they were all meant to denote strength and prowess.

Anyway, Du Xing continued: “They also have an arms instructor named Luan (2) Tingyü (2,4) the Iron Staff. That guy has the valor of 10,000 men. Their manor has a couple thousand workhands who are skilled fighters.

“On the west side is the Hu (4) Family Manor, led by Old Squire Hu (4). He has a son named Hu (4) Cheng (2) the Flying Tiger, who is a skilled fighter as well. But the real hero there is his daughter, Hu (4)

Sanniang (1,2), nicknamed Ten Feet of Steel. She wields two curved sabers and is quite adept on horseback.

“On the east side is the Li (3) Family Manor, led by my master. His name is Li Ying (4). He wields a steel spear and on his back he carries five concealed throwing knives. He can hit a man at 100 paces before you could blink.”

“These three villages have sworn an oath to join together and help each other out in times of danger. It’s because they want to be prepared to repel raids from the Liangshan bandits. Right now, I can take the two of you to see my master, and ask him to write a letter to the Zhu (4) family to save Shi Qian.”

Yang Xiong now asked, “Is your master Li Ying (4) the one they call the Striking Hawk?”

“That’s him,” Du Xing confirmed.

Shi Xiu chimed in, “I’ve heard on the jianghu scene that there is a Li Ying the Striking Hawk at Lone Dragon Ridge and that he’s a hero. Turns out he’s right here. I’ve heard much about him. He sounds like a good man. Let’s go meet him.”

So Yang Xiong summoned the waiter and asked for the bill, but of course Du Xing was not going to let him pay. They then left the tavern and headed to the Li Family Manor. This was an impressive estate, surrounded by a wide moat and a few hundred willow trees that were so thick that you couldn’t wrap your arms around them. A drawbridge shielded the main gate. Once they set foot inside, they went to the main hall, which was lined on both sides with 20-some racks of shimmering weapons.

Du Xing went to the back and returned momentarily with his master, Li Ying, who was a striking figure of a man, with the eyes of a falcon, a head shaped like a tiger’s, long arms like an ape, and a slender waist like a wolf. He welcomed his guests, asked them to sit down, and offered them wine. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu then bowed and asked if he could write a letter to the Zhus to ask them to release Shi

Qian. Li Ying immediately summoned the family tutor, dictated a letter, and stamped it with his seal. He then sent an assistant steward to deliver it at once to the Zhus.

Once the assistant steward left on horseback, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu bowed again to thank their host. Li Ying said, "Heroes, don't worry. As soon as they get my letter, they will release your man."

He then invited his guests to his private quarters for wine and food. After their meal, they had tea, and Li Ying chatted with his guests about weapons and such, and he was delighted by their knowledge of the martial arts.

Around 10 a.m., the assistant steward came back. Li Ying summoned him to the private quarters and asked, "Where's the man you went to fetch?"

"Your servant saw the head of the Zhu family and delivered the letter. He was leaning toward releasing Shi Qian, but then his three sons came out and threw a fit. They refused to send a return letter or release the man, and said they were going to take him to the prefecture to turn him over to the authorities."

Li Ying was taken aback. "They have sworn an oath with me, so they should respond to my letter. How could they act like that? You must have misspoken and caused this misunderstanding. Steward Du, you must go yourself and see Zhu Chaofeng (2,4) the patriarch, and clear this up."

Du Xing said, "Your servant is willing to go, but I would like to ask you to personally write a letter. Only then would they agree to release Shi Qian."

"Quite right," Li Ying said, and he immediately wrote a letter himself and stamped the envelope with his personal seal. Du Xing took the letter, hopped on a fast horse, and galloped off toward the Zhu Family Manor.

"Don't worry," Li Ying said to Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu. "My personal letter will secure Shi Qian's return shortly."

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu thanked him again, and they resumed drinking.

As evening was approaching, Du Xing still had not returned. Li Ying was getting worried, so he was about to send someone to check on Du Xing. But then, a workhand said that Du Xing had just come back.

“How many people does he have with him?” Li Ying asked.

“Just himself,” the workhand said.

Shaking his head, Li Ying said, “This is strange. Usually he doesn’t take so long. Why is he so slow today?”

So he and his guests went outside the main hall and saw Du Xing dismount and come into the manor. His countenance, never pretty to begin with, was even more ragged at the moment as he was flushed with anger. His face was purple and tight with rage, and his teeth were bared. He was so mad that he couldn’t speak for a few minutes.

“Tell me everything. What happened?” Li Ying asked.

After calming himself down, Du Xing finally said, “I brought your letter and arrived at their third big gate. There I ran into the three sons, who were just sitting around. I greeted them each respectfully, but the youngest son, Zhu Biao (1), scoffed and said, ‘What are you doing here?!’ I bowed and said, ‘My master has a letter for you.’ But Zhu Biao got angry and cursed, ‘Your master really doesn’t know any better! He sent a wretch here this morning to ask for that Liangshan bandit Shi Qian. Well, I’m just about to turn him over to the authorities at the prefecture. What does your master want now?!’

“Then I said, ‘That Shi Qian is not a member of the Liangshan bandits. He is a traveler from Jizhou Prefecture. He was on his way to see my master but by mistake burned down your inn. My master will rebuild your inn. On his account, please show some leniency and forgiveness.’

“But then all three of them started shouting that they won’t give Shi Qian back. So I said, ‘Please see my master’s personal hand here.’ But Zhu Biao grabbed the letter and tore it to smithereens without even opening it. And then he ordered his men to kick me out. And his two brothers even said, ‘Don’t piss

us off, or we'll arrest your master, too, and turn him in as a Liangshan bandit as well.' I wasn't going to tell you all that, but those three animals were so rude and cursed you left and right. They even told their men to arrest me, but I managed to ride off. I was so pissed that I almost died of anger on the way back. We've been their sworn allies all these years, and yet today they showed no honor at all!"

When he heard all this, Li Ying flew into a rage and shouted, "Men, prepare my horse!"

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu quickly tried to calm him down, but Li Ying would not hear of it. He put on a suit of golden armor, a red battle robe, and his five throwing knives. He then grabbed his spear, donned his helmet, and rounded up 300 stout workmen. Du Xing also put on some armor, picked up a spear and led 20-some riders in support. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu each took a long-handle broadsword and followed Li Ying's horse as they rode off for the Zhu Family Manor.

As the setting sun was hugging the horizon, they arrived at Lone Dragon Ridge and lined up. The Zhu Family Manor was like a fortress. Situated atop Lone Dragon Ridge, it was surrounded by a wide moat. The manor was defended by three walls, all made of sturdy stone and standing more than 20 feet tall. There two two entrances, one in the front and the other in the back, and both were controlled by drawbridges. Within the walls were huts bristling with weapons, and in the gatehouse atop the wall were war drums and gongs.

Reining in his horse, Li Ying shouted, "The three sons of the Zhu family, how dare you mock me?!"

At that, the front gate opened, and about 60 riders galloped out, led by the youngest brother, Zhu Biao, who sat atop a horse the color of burning coal. He donned a suit of armor and a helmet, and wielded a spear.

When Li Ying saw Zhu Biao, he pointed and cursed, "You little punk! I can still smell breast milk on your lips and see baby hair on your head. Your father and I are sworn allies and have pledged to work together to protect our homes and villages. Whatever your household has asked for, whether it's people

or things, we have delivered. But today, I just asked for one man, and I had to send two letters, and you dared to tear up my letter and mock my name?!"

Zhu Biao wasn't backing down, though. He shot back, "My family swore an oath with you to work together to capture the Liangshan bandits and cleanse their stronghold, so why are you in cahoots with rebels and committing treason?"

"How can you say that man is a member of the Liangshan gang?" Li Ying retorted. "You're framing an innocent man as a crook. What crime is that?"

"Look, Shi Qian himself has already confessed," Zhu Biao said. "So stop your nonsense. You can't lie. Go on your way, or if you don't, then I'll arrest you and send you off as a criminal too."

That was the last straw, and Li Ying galloped toward Zhu Biao and the two tangled in front of the ridge. After trading blows for almost 20 bouts, Zhu Biao was starting to falter, so he turned and rode away. Li Ying gave chase, but suddenly, Zhu Biao pulled out his bow and arrow and fired off a shot. Li Ying tried to dodge it, but the arrow had lodged itself in his arm, sending him tumbling off his horse.

Zhu Biao now turned around and rode toward Li Ying. Seeing this, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu charged forward with broadswords in hand. Zhu Biao was no match for them, so he turned and fled, but as he turned, Yang Xiong stabbed his horse in the hindquarters. The horse reared up in pain, and almost flipped Zhu Biao off. By now, though, Zhu Biao's entourage were taking aim with their own bows and arrows. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu weren't wearing armor, so they had to fall back. Meanwhile, Du Xing helped his master Li Ying back onto his horse and they all retreated. The Zhu family's men gave chase for a mile before darkness descended, so they turned and went home.

When Li Ying and company retreated back to his manor, they helped him off his horse and into his private quarters. His servants came out to tend to him. They removed the arrow, took off his armor, and bandaged the wound with some medicinal ointment. Li Ying then discussed the situation with his guests.

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu said to Du Xing, “Your lord has been ridiculed by that scoundrel and suffered an arrow wound, and we still couldn’t get Shi Qian back. This is all our fault, bringing this trouble to your lord. Right now, our only option is to go to Liangshan and ask the chieftains there to come avenge your lord and rescue Shi Qian.”

As they took their leave, Li Ying said, “It’s not that I didn’t try; there’s just nothing else I can do. Heroes, please forgive me.”

He then told Du Xing to give his guests some gold and silver. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu tried to decline, but relented after some insistence from Li Ying. Du Xing then escorted them out to the main road and pointed them in the direction of Liangshan.

After walking for a while, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu came across a newly built tavern, and they stopped in for some wine and directions. Turns out this was a Liangshan-owned and operated franchise. Apparently the black-tavern-slash-recon-base business was good, and Liangshan decided to expand. This new location was run by the chieftain Shi (2) Yong (3) the Stone General. When he saw these two uncommon-looking men drinking and asking for directions to Liangshan, he asked them, “Sirs, where are you coming from? Why are you asking about how to get up to Liangshan?”

“We are from Jizhou Prefecture,” Yang Xiong answered.

That rang a bell for Shi Yong. “Are you Shi Xiu?” he asked.

“No, I am Yang Xiong. THIS is my brother Shi Xiu. How do you know him?”

“I actually don’t. But Brother Dai Zong the Magic Traveler came back from Jizhou and raved about him, so I’ve long heard of his name. It’s so great that you are joining us!”

So the three men formally greeted each other, and then Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu explained why they were there. Shi Yong told the waiter to bring out more wine and food, while he shot a whistling arrow across the water. Soon, a small boat came over, and Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu got on and the boat set off

toward Duck's Beak Beach. Shi Yong had already sent word up to the stronghold, so Dai Zong and Yang Lin, the two guys who recruited Shi Xiu, came down to greet them and accompany them up to the stronghold.

In the Hall of Honor, all the chieftains had gathered to meet the new additions. Dai Zong and Yang Lin introduced the new recruits, and everyone exchanged greetings. The leader Chao Gai then asked about their backgrounds, so Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu described their martial skills and how they came to be there. Everyone was delighted and offered them a seat. Then, Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu continued talking and told them how they actually had a third guy with them named Shi Qian, but he stole the rooster at the Zhu Family Inn and during the squabble Shi Xiu burned down the inn but Shi Qian got caught. They also talked about how Li Ying tried to help them, but the Zhu brothers refused to release Shi Qian and even swore they were going to apprehend all the chieftains of Liangshan and so on and so forth. Can you believe the gall?

When he heard that last part, Chao Gai flew into a rage. Which was good, right? Now he's definitely going to help us get Shi Qian back.

"Men! Execute these two and bring me their heads!" Chao Gai barked as he pointed to Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu.

Everyone was stunned, and Song Jiang quickly asked, "Brother, please calm down. These two heroes have come a long way to join our cause. Why do you want to execute them?"

"Ever since we took over control of this stronghold, the heroes of Liangshan have always put loyalty and honor above all else and acted virtuously toward the common people," Chao Gai said. "Whenever our brothers have gone down the mountain, they have never sullied our reputation. And all the brothers who have joined us are honorable and chivalrous. And yet these two knaves used our good name to steal a chicken for dinner, and brought shame upon us as well. We must execute them first and use their

heads as a warning. And then we'll mobilize our forces and flatten that damn village, so as to protect our reputation. Men, execute them at once!"

Hmm, always "acted virtuously toward the common people", huh? Was that before or after you guys slaughtered hundreds of innocent civilians while rescuing Song Jiang at the execution grounds? Or when Song Jiang devised a scheme that killed hundreds of other civilians to recruit one man? Or when you guys just abducted two craftsmen and forced them to join your ranks? Or when some of your recent recruits were running deadly Uber scams on random passengers who got into their boats? I'm not calling anyone a hypocrite; all I'm saying that this is some funny looking form of virtue that Chao Gai was ranting about.

To see if Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu will lose their heads, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, in yet another virtuous act, our honorable heroes will march on the Zhu Family Manor, intent on razing it to the ground for the offense of daring to arrest a crook who stole their stuff, killed their men, and burned down their property. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!