

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 70.

Last time, Yang Xiong and his hetero lifemate Shi Xiu arrived on Liangshan to join the gang. It was going well at first, until they mentioned how their friend Shi Qian had stolen somebody's rooster, burned down their inn, and then got caught, so can we please go kill some manorial lords and tenant farmers to save him? When he heard that, Chao Gai got really upset. He was like, "What?! How dare you steal a chicken and burn down a house? That is SO much worse than anything we have ever done. I'm going to have your heads for sullyng our good name. ... And THEN I'll go kill some manorial lords and tenant farmers, also for sullyng our good name."

While Chao Gai was calling for the guards to execute Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu, Song Jiang stopped him and said, "Brother, you must not! Did you not hear what our new brothers told you just now? That Shi Qian is a hero just like us; that's why he got into it with those knaves at the Zhu Family Manor. These two new brothers didn't bring any dishonor to our name. I have also often heard people say that those scoundrels in the Zhu family are set on being our nemesis. Right now, we have a lot of people and not enough money or grain. We didn't go looking for trouble with those Zhus; they came looking for trouble with us. This is the perfect opportunity to go and attack them. If we can sack their manor, that'll give us four or five years' worth of food. We didn't start this thing; they did by being so insolent. Brother, please calm yourself. I may be untalented, but I am willing to lead an army and a few of our brothers to go attack the Zhu Family Manor. I swear I will not return until I have cleansed that village. One, we will get revenge and preserve our reputation. Two, we will avoid being humiliated by such knaves. Three, we would secure many provisions for the stronghold. And four, we can invite that Li Ying (4) the Striking Hawk to come join us."

Wu Yong, the military strategist, chimed in and said, "Brother Song is quite right. How can we execute our own brothers?"

Dai Zong the Magical Traveler also spoke up. "I would rather have you execute me than them, so that we do not turn away talented men in the future."

All the other chieftains also joined in and asked for leniency, so Chao Gai relented and spared the two newcomers. Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu also apologized and begged for forgiveness. Song Jiang consoled them, saying, "Brothers, don't let this give you any second thoughts. This is the law of the stronghold, and we must follow it. Even if I broke the rules, I would have to lose my head. There is no mercy. And recently, we added Pei (2) Xuan (1) the Iron-Faced Scribe as military supervisor. He has laid out detailed rewards and punishments. Please don't hold a grudge."

Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu were glad to keep their heads, so they bowed, apologized, and thanked the chieftains. Chao Gai told them to sit below Yang Lin, and then hey, it's party time! Let's throw a feast to welcome these two new guys that I just almost executed. Any excuse for getting drunk, I guess. Anyway, after the feast, the two newcomers got settled in, and they were each assigned 10 lackeys to tend to their needs. They partied again the next day, and then everyone gathered to discuss their next move.

The next move was to go teach those arrogant jerks at the Zhu Family Manor a lesson for daring to defend themselves against having their stuff stolen and their houses burned down. Chao Gai would remain in the stronghold, along with Wu Yong, Liu Tang the Red-haired Devil, the three Ruan brothers and a few other chieftains to hold down the fort. Song Jiang would set out with over 6,000 men to lead the campaign. He divided the troops into two forces. The first force was led by him and nine other chieftains, including the likes of Hua Rong the archer, Li Jun (4) the River Dragon, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, the newcomers Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu and so forth. The second force was led by nine other chieftains, headed up by Lin Chong the Panther Head, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Dai Zong the Magic Traveler and so forth. Each force consisted of 3,000 foot soldiers and 300 cavalry. Song Jiang's

force would take the lead, while Lin Chong's force would follow as backup. The whole army then set out down the mountain, sailed across the water, and began marching.

Song Jiang and the lead column soon approached Lone Dragon Mountain. They set up camp less than a mile away. Song Jiang then sat down in the command tent and discussed strategies with Hua Rong the archer.

"I've heard that the roads around the Zhu Family Manor are numerous and complex, so we can't just march in there," Song Jiang said. "We must send a couple men in to check out the roads and figure out the correct path before the army can go in and fight."

Li Kui the Blackwhirlwind quickly raised his hand. "Brother, I've been idle and haven't killed anyone for so long. Let me go first."

"You can't go," Song Jiang said. "If we were mounting a frontal assault, then you can take the lead. But this is detailed, covert stuff. It's not your strength."

But Li Kui laughed, "It's just a damn manor. How hard can it be? I'll just take a few hundred men and charge in there and slaughter everyone inside. Why even bother with reconnaissance?"

"Stop your nonsense!" Song Jiang chided him. "Go to the next room. Don't come until we call for you."

"Man, what's the big deal? It's just swatting a few flies," Li Kui grumbled as he walked off.

Song Jiang now called Shi Xiu the Daredevil over and said, "Brother, you have been here before, so please go with Yang Lin the Multicolor Leopard to do some scouting."

Shi Xiu said, "Right now we are here with an army, so the people in the manor must be prepared. How should we disguise ourselves?"

Yang Lin suggested, "I can dress up as an exorcist and hide a dagger on my body. I'll carry my exorcism rattle and go in there. You can listen for my rattle and stay close."

Shi Xiu added, "And I used to sell firewood back in Jizhou, so I can carry a load of firewood in there to sell and also hide a dagger on my body. In a pinch, I can also use my shoulder pole as a weapon."

So early the next morning, Shi Xiu set off first and went into the area around the manor. He had not gone but six or seven miles before the road split off into numerous winding paths lined with thick woods, making it hard to figure out which way to go. So Shi Xiu set down his firewood and waited.

Soon, he heard the chimes of an exorcist rattle coming from behind. He turned and saw Yang Lin, who was wearing a tattered bamboo rain hat and an old exorcist robe, and holding an exorcist's rattle in his hands.

Seeing no one else around, Shi Xiu said to Yang Lin, "The roads are all winding and hard to keep track of. These aren't the roads we took when we came here with Li Ying the other day. It was getting dark that day and they all knew the roads, so I didn't get a good look."

"Don't worry about whether it's a straight or windy path," Yang Lin said. "Just stick to the main road."

So Shi Xiu picked up his firewood and continued down the main road. After a while, he saw a village house and a few taverns and butcher shops. He stopped in front of a tavern for a breather and saw that every shop had weapons out front, and every person wore a yellow vest bearing the large character "Zhu", as did everyone else who passed through this spot.

Shi Xiu saw an old man, so he went over, bowed, and asked, "Grandpa, may I ask why there are weapons out in front of every house here? What local custom is this?"

The old man looked him over and said, "Where are you from? If you don't know where you are, you better hurry up and keep moving."

"I am a date merchant from Shandong Province," Shi Xiu answered. "I lost my capital and couldn't go home, so I gathered this load of firewood and came here to sell it. Where is this place?"

“Hurry up and find some other place to hide,” the old man said. “There’s going to be a big battle here sooner or later.”

“How could there be a battle in such a nice village?”

“Sir, you really don’t know? Then let me tell you. This is the Zhu Family Manor. The patriarch lives up on the ridge. He’s run afoul of the Liangshan heroes, so they have come here with an army. But they are worried about how complicated the roads are in this village, so they dare not come in and are camped outside the village. The Zhu family has sent instructions that every household’s young men must be ready. As soon as they hear the order, they must go join the fight.”

“Grandpa, how many households are in this village?” Shi Xiu asked.

“This Zhu Family Village has about 20,000 households. And there are reinforcements to the east and west. The master of the east village is Lord Li Ying the Striking Hawk. The master of the west village is Old Squire Hu (4), and he has a daughter named Hu (4) Sanniang, and she is a very skilled fighter.”

“Well then, what do you have to worry about bandits for?” Shi Xiu inquired.

“Even when I first came here and didn’t know the roads, I would get lost and get caught, too,” the old man told him.

“Grandpa, why did you get caught?”

“There’s a poem about our roads here. It says, ‘What a Zhu Family Manor, all surrounded by winding roads. You can come in any time you like, but you can never leave.’ ”

At that, Shi Xiu started to cry and fell to his knees.

“Grandpa, I am a broke drifter who can’t go home. If I leave after selling my firewood and run into the battle with the outlaws, I would never be able to get away. What then?! Sir, please take pity on me! I can give you this load of firewood as a gift. Please just tell me how to get out of here.”

“I’m not going to take your firewood for free,” the old man said. “I’ll buy it. C’mon in and have some wine and food first.”

Shi Xiu thanked him and followed him into the house. The old man poured out two bowls of rice wine and a bowl of rice porridge for him. Shi Xiu bowed and thanked him again, and then asked him about the roads around the village.

The old man told him, "When you're in the village, whenever you see a white poplar tree, turn there. No matter how wide or narrow the road is, if you see a white poplar, turn, and that will be the right way. All other paths are dead ends. And if you turn at any other type of tree, those will also lead to dead ends. Once you take a wrong turn, you're going to get turned around and won't be able to get out. The dead-end roads are also strewn with hidden bamboo spikes and iron prongs. One wrong step, and you'll set them off, and then you'll be captured for sure."

Shi Xiu thanked him for the guidance and asked for his name. The old man said, "Most people here are named Zhu, but my last name is Zhongli (1,2). My family has always been here."

"Thank you for the wine and food, and I will repay you properly another day," Shi Xiu said.

While they were talking, they suddenly heard a loud commotion outside. Shi Xiu listened and heard someone shouting that they had captured a spy, which alarmed him. He stepped outside with the old man and saw about 80 militiamen escorting a bound prisoner. This was none other than Yang Lin, the other chieftain who had come in with Shi Xiu to scout out the place. He had been stripped of his clothes and was tightly bound.

Seeing his comrade arrested, Shi Xiu could do nothing but lament in silence. He played dumb and asked the old man, "Who is that man they've captured? Why did they tie him up?"

"Didn't you hear? He's a spy sent by Song Jiang."

"How did they catch him?"

"That knave's got some gall. He dared to come here alone to spy. He was disguised as an exorcist and snuck into the village. But he didn't know the roads around here, so he just stuck to the main road

and kept going in circles and ran into dead ends since he doesn't know about the white poplars. Someone noticed him and reported him to the lords at the manor, and they came to arrest him. And then that knave pulled out his dagger and wounded four or five guys before they overwhelmed him. Someone recognized him as an outlaw named Yang Lin the Multicolored Leopard.

The old man had not finished speaking when more commotion broke out. Someone said the masters were coming by on patrol. Shi Xiu hid inside the house and peeked out through a crack. He saw 20 foot soldiers with red-tasseled spears, followed by four or five mounted archers. Behind them, another four or five riders on white horses surrounded a young man on a snow-white horse. He was decked out in armor, wore a set of bow and arrows, and wielded a silver spear.

Shi Xiu recognized this guy, but he kept up his act and asked the old man who that was.

"That's our master's third son, Zhu Biao. He's arranged to marry the daughter of Old Squire Hu (4) from the Hu Family Manor to the west of here. Among the three Zhu brothers, he is the best warrior."

Shi Xiu thanked the old man again and prepared to leave, but his host said, "It's getting late, and there might be a battle out there. You could be throwing away your life for nothing."

"Sir, please save me," Shi Xiu said.

"You can rest here tonight. Tomorrow, if all is calm, then you can leave."

Shi Xiu thanked him and stayed. That evening, he heard four or five messengers riding through the village, telling every household, "All civilians must keep a look out for the red lantern as the signal. We must all work together to apprehend the outlaws of Liangshan and take them to the authorities for a reward."

"Who's that?" Shi Xiu asked his host after the last messenger left.

"He's the local sheriff. They're making plans to capture Song Jiang tonight."

Shi Xiu thought about that for a bit, and then he asked his host for a torch, said good night, and went to sleep in the thatched hut in the back of the house.

Meanwhile, outside the village, Song Jiang and his army had been parked out front all day and still had not heard a word from Yang Lin or Shi Xiu. So he sent another chieftain, Ou (1) Peng (2) the Golden Wings Brushing Against the Clouds, to the entrance of the village to see what's going on. Ou Peng took a quick peek and reported back.

"I heard a lot of commotion in the village. They were saying that they've captured a spy. I saw that the roads were very confusing, so I didn't dare to venture too far."

Song Jiang grew angry. "How can we wait until they report back before we attack? They've captured a spy, so our two brothers must be trapped in there. Let's advance tonight and storm in there to rescue them. What do you think, chieftains?"

Li Kui leaped to his feet and said, "Let me take the lead and crash in there to check it out."

Song Jiang then ordered everyone to get ready. Li Kui and Yang Xiong would lead the vanguard, and Li Jun the River Dragon would command the rear. Mu (4) Hong (2) the Unrestrained led the left, while Huang Xin (4) the Suppressor of Three Mountains led the right. Song Jiang commanded the center with the chieftains Hua Rong and Ou Peng.

Amid fluttering banners, roaring battle cries, and loud war drums and gongs, the Liangshan forces stormed toward the Zhu Family Manor. By dusk, they had arrived atop Lone Dragon Ridge. Song Jiang ordered the vanguard to lay siege to the manor. Li Kui, stripped to the waist, wielded his twin battle axes and led the charge toward the walls. When they arrived in front of the manor, they saw that the drawbridge had been pulled up, and there was not a single light inside the manor.

Li Kui was just about to cross the moat, but Yang Xiong pulled him back. "That won't do! Their gates are shut, so they must be prepared. Wait for Brother Song and then we can discuss how to proceed."



But Li Kui was already riled up. He smacked his axes against each other and shouted toward the walls, "Old Squire Zhu (4), come out here, you old fart! Your granddaddy Black Whirlwind is waiting!"

But there was no answer from the manor. Soon, Song Jiang arrived with the main army. Yang Xiong explained the situation, and Song Jiang went up to take a look. In the dark of the night, he saw neither soldiers nor weapons atop the walls.

Suddenly, a thought flashed into his mind. "I've made a mistake!" he said. "The divine scrolls clearly warned me against being impatient in battle. I was blind for a moment out of my desire to save my brothers. We have advanced deep into enemy territory at night. We came all the way to their front door and haven't met any resistance. This must be a trap. Retreat at once!"

But Li Kui shouted, "Brother, we are already here, why retreat? Let's charge over there first. Come with me!"

But just then, a signal rocket shot up from inside the manor and exploded in the night sky. Immediately, thousands of torches appeared on the ridge, and countless arrows rained down from the manor's walls. Song Jiang hurriedly led his forces back along the way they came, but the rear guard started shouting, "The way we came has been blocked. There must be an ambush back that way."

So Song Jiang ordered his men to spread out and search for another path out. Li Kui, meanwhile, brandished his axes looking for people to kill, but could not find any enemies.

Now, another signal rocket shot up from the ridge, and battle cries rose up from all around, leaving Song Jiang stunned and panicked. He now ordered his forces to fight their way toward the main road, but soon, his soldiers started shouting in consternation.

"What's wrong?!" Song Jiang asked.

"The roads ahead all go in circles," his men said. "We followed them and ended up back here again!"

"Tell our men to go toward the torches and houses," Song Jiang said. "There should be a way out there."

So they headed that way, but soon, the men in front started shouting again. "The road forward is strewn with bamboo pikes and iron prongs. There's no way to get through!"

"Is heaven trying to kill me?!" Song Jiang lamented. Just then, a commotion rose up on his left flank, and soon a familiar face appeared, holding a broadsword. It was none other than Shi Xiu.

"Brother Song, don't panic!" Shi Xiu shouted. "I know the way. Issue secret orders for our men to look for white poplar trees. Whenever they see one, turn onto that path, and that will take us out of here."

So the Liangshan forces did as he said and turned whenever they came across a white poplar. After a couple miles, they suddenly saw a surge of enemy forces up ahead.

"They are using a red lantern as a signal to move their forces around," Shi Xiu said.

The chieftain Hua Rong looked around and pointed into the distance. "Brother, look! Do you see that lantern in the woods? They are moving that lantern in whichever direction that we are going in. That must be their signal."

"What should we do?" Song Jiang asked.

"No problem," Hua Rong said as he took out his bow, nocked an arrow, and let fly a shot toward the woods. A split second later, the red lantern crashed to the ground below, and on cue, the enemy forces fell into disarray.

This was the opening Song Jiang needed. He told Shi Xiu to lead the way as their troops made their way out of the village. Just as they approached the entrance, more battle cries echoed in the distance, accompanied by an array of torches. Song Jiang told his army to hold up and sent Shi Xiu on ahead to see what that's all about. He came back momentarily and said that these were their own guys. It was the reinforcements led by Lin Chong the Panther Head. They had crashed onto the scene and dispersed the enemy.

Song Jiang now told his men to advance toward the village entrance and attack the enemy from both sides. The Zhu family's forces scattered, and Song Jiang met up with his reinforcements. When dawn broke, they set up camp on some high grounds.

When it came time to assess the night's damage, they noticed that someone was missing -- the chieftain Huang Xin (4), the Suppressor of Three Mountains. Song Jiang was alarmed and asked what happened. Some of the soldiers who were in the thick of the action last night told him, "Chieftain Huang was scouting the roads ahead as you instructed when suddenly two long hooks reached out from the tall grass and tripped up his horse. He was taken away by a bunch of enemies and we couldn't save him."

Song Jiang was furious and wanted to execute those soldiers for not reporting this earlier. But the other chieftains talked him off the ledge, and everyone then turned their attention to what to do next.

Yang Xiong now said, "The three villages here are allies. The village on the east side is owned by Li Ying (4). A couple days ago he took an arrow from one of the Zhu's sons, and he's recuperating at home. Brother, why don't you pay him a visit to discuss this?"

"I totally forgot about him," Song Jiang said. "He would know the geography around here."

So he told his men to prepare a pair of sheep and a jug of wine, along with a fine horse and saddle, and he set out with the chieftains Hua Rong, Yang Xiong, and Shi Xiu, along with 300 soldiers, to pay a call to the Li Family Manor.

When they arrived outside Li Ying's manor, however, they saw that the drawbridge was up and the gates were shut tight. The walls were lined with soldiers, and as soon as they were within view, war drums started rolling.

Song Jiang shouted from atop his horse, "I am Song Jiang, a warrior from Liangshan. I have come to pay my respects to his lordship, nothing else. Please do not be alarmed."

From atop the walls, Li Ying's steward Du (4) Xing (1) spotted Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu among the entourage, so he he hurried down and opened the gates, rowed across the moat on a small boat, and greeted Song Jiang, and Song Jiang quickly dismounted and returned the gesture, while Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu made the introductions.

"Ah, so you are Steward Du," Song Jiang said. "May I trouble you to tell your lord that I have long admired his great name and lamented not having a chance to meet him. Today, the Zhu family is hell bent on being our nemesis. We were passing through here and decided to bring him some presents and only hope to meet with him briefly. We have no other intentions."

Du Xing went back in and relayed the message. At that moment, Li Ying was still bandaged up and sitting in bed. When Du Xing told him what Song Jiang had said, Li Ying said, "That Song Jiang is a rebel. How can I meet with him? Even if there's nothing to it, it would make the authorities suspicious of me. You can go back and tell him that I'm laid up in bed and cannot move around. Tell him that we will meet some other day. Do not accept any of his presents."

So Du Xing came back out and relayed his master's message, to which Song Jiang replied, "I understand your master's meaning. We tried to attack the Zhu Family Manor but suffered a setback, so we came to see him for advice. He's afraid that the Zhus would take exception to that, so he refuses to see us."

"That's not the case," Du Xing said, even though that was totally the case. "He really is not feeling well. Even though I did not grow up here, I have lived here for many years and know the area well. The three villages here have sworn to be allies and protect each other. But right now, the Zhus have offended my master, so he's not going to help them. But you still have to worry about the Hu (4) family to the west. The only one you have to worry about from there is a female warrior named Hu Sanniang. She's nicknamed Ten Feet of Steel because she wields two curved sabers. She is very formidable. She's also slated to marry the Zhus' youngest son, Zhu Biao. When and if you attack the Zhu Family Manor

again, you don't have to worry about them getting reinforcements from the east. Just watch out for the Hus from the west. The Zhu Family Manor has two entrances, one on the front side of Lone Dragon Ridge, and one on the back side. You won't get anywhere just attacking them from the front. You must attack both gates at the same time. Only then can you breach their defenses."

Du Xing then told them about the secret of the white poplars, and Shi Xiu said, "But they've now cut down all the white poplars, so what should we do?"

"They've chopped down the trees, but the stumps are still there," Du Xing said. "But you must only attack during the day, never at night."

Hey. Why the hell didn't we come here first, BEFORE we attacked last night? This intel sure would've been handy. To see what Song Jiang and company will do with this new-not-new information, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we get a glimpse at this female warrior everyone is talking about. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!"