

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 84.

Last time, after an Avengers-style team-up that brought a bunch of new heroes to Liangshan, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk said, “What? You wanted more?” Turns out, he had more. He volunteered to go recruit his old friend Shi (3) Jin (4) the Nine Tattoo Dragons, who was the first outlaw hero we encountered in the novel. But when he got to Shi Jin’s base at Shaohua (4,2) Mountain, he found out that Shi Jin had recently been arrested by the prefect of Huazhou (2,1) Prefecture. Lu Zhishen promptly stomped off to go rescue Shi Jin, only to get himself caught and thrown in jail as well.

News of Lu Zhishen’s mishap soon made its way back to Shaohua Mountain. Wu Song the Pilgrim, who had accompanied Lu Zhishen there, was panicking at the news when suddenly word came that another chieftain from Liangshan had arrived at the mountain. It was Dai (4) Zong (1) the Magic Traveler. Wu Song and the three local chieftains quickly welcomed him and told him what happened.

“I cannot stay here then,” Dai Zong said with alarm. “I must rush back to Liangshan and tell our leaders, so they can mobilize an army and mount a rescue.”

“In that case, I will stay here and wait for your return,” Wu Song said.

So Dai Zong ate a quick meal and immediately started back. After three days, he arrived back at Liangshan and filled in the leaders Chao Gai and Song Jiang.

“Since we have two brothers in danger, how can we not do anything?” Song Jiang said. “We must not delay. Let’s mobilize our forces and set out in three columns.”

So he sent 5 top-notch warriors to lead the vanguard. These were Hua Rong the archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Lin Chong the Panther Head, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast, and the newcomer Huyan (1,2) Zhuo (2). They set out with 1,000 armored cavalry and 2,000 infantry. Song Jiang and the strategist Wu Yong led the main army with four other chieftains and 2,000 troops. Five other chieftains led 2,000 men in the rear, guarding the provisions.

This army of 7,000 soon arrived at Shaohua Mountain, and the chieftains there, led by Zhu (1) Wu (3) the Resourceful Strategist, came down with Wu Song to pay their respects. At the welcome banquet, Song Jiang asked for an update. Zhu Wu told him that Shi Jin and Lu Zhishen were both in prison in Huazhou Prefecture, and the prefect was waiting for orders from the imperial court about what to do with them.

“Huazhou has strong walls and deep moats,” Zhu Wu then told them. “It would be hard to sack the city in a hurry. The only way is to have someone on the inside.”

Wu Yong said, “Let’s go take a look, and then discuss how to proceed.”

Song Jiang was on pins and needles, pining for morning so they could go scout the city. Wu Yong told him, “Right now they have two tigers in their prison, so how can the city’s defenses not be on high alert? We can’t go scouting during the day. Tonight the moon will be bright. We can head down the mountain around 5 p.m., and wait until 7 p.m., and then go check out the city.”

After a seeming eternity, evening finally approached. Song Jiang and Wu Yong, along with the chieftains Hua Rong the archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, and Zhu (1) Tong (2) the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, arrived outside Huazhou Prefecture around 7 p.m. They found a high vantage point and looked down into the city. It was the middle of the second month, and the moon was shining brightly on a clear night. They saw that the city had numerous gates, sturdy and tall walls, and deep and wide moats.

They also took note of the Hua (2) Mountain in the distance. This Hua (2) Mountain is one of the five great mountains of China and has long held religious significance. It was a truly majestic mountain, but at the moment, Song Jiang was in no mood for sightseeing. His concern was the city in front of the mountain, which looked impenetrable.

“Let’s go back to camp and then discuss it,” Wu Yong said, noting Song Jiang’s long face.

Song Jiang's frown did not improve after they returned to Shaohua Mountain, so Wu Yong suggested that they send out some lackeys to gather intel from near and far as they planned their next move.

Within a couple days, this intelligence dragnet paid off. One of the lackeys reported back that the emperor had dispatched a marshal from the Council of Imperial Defense to offer incense on Hua (2) Mountain. Aside from burning incense, this marshal was bringing a set of special imperial golden bells to be hung at the temple on the mountain.

"Brother, no need to worry now," Wu Yong immediately said to Song Jiang. "This is our opportunity."

He then summoned the naval chieftains Li Jun (4) the River Dragon and Zhang Shun (4) the White Streak in the Waves and gave them some instructions.

"But we don't know the geography around here; we need a guide," Li Jun said after receiving his directions.

One of the Shaohua Mountain chieftains, Yang (2) Chun (1) the White Flower Serpent, immediately volunteered, so he set out with Li Jun and Zhang Shun right away. The next day, Song Jiang, Wu Yong, and six other chieftains went down the mountain with 500 men and stealthily approached a crossing point in the nearby Wei (4) River. Waiting there for them were the three chieftains who had set out the day before. They had commandeered a dozen or so large boats. Wu Yong now gave out more instructions, and everyone snapped to.

The next morning, three imperial ships were cruising down the river, banging gongs and drums. Peeking out from his hiding place on the river bank, Song Jiang could see a white banner on the lead ship that said, "Marshal Su (4), He Who Burns Incense on Hua Mountain by Imperial Decree."

When he saw this marshal's last name, Song Jiang rejoiced. The reason? Well, this Chinese character Su (4) means lodging, and it made Song Jiang remember the four lines of divine guidance he had received from the Mystic Queen when he was hiding in an old temple back in episode 62. The first line of her guidance said, "Great joy follows when you find lodging," and the character she used for lodging was the same as this marshal's last name. So Song Jiang figured something good was going to come out of this encounter.

As the marshal's ships approached the mouth of the river, they suddenly saw a boat dart out, blocking their path. On the boat stood Song Jiang and Wu Yong, flanked by the chieftains Li Ying (4) the Striking Hawk and Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, both armed with spears.

The imperial fleet pulled up, and from the marshal's ship emerged 20-some officers clad in purple robes and silver belts. They shouted at Song Jiang and company, "Hey, who are you people?! How dare you block a high official's path?!"

Song Jiang clasped his hands before him, made a deep bow, and offered a respectful greeting, while Wu Yong stood at the head of the boat and replied, "This is Song Jiang, a champion of the righteous from Liangshan Marsh, awaiting your gracious orders."

A chamberlain from the marshal's staff came out and said, "We are transporting a marshal of the imperial court to Hua (2) Mountain to burn incense as instructed by imperial decree. You all are rebels from Liangshan. How dare you block our path?!"

To this, Wu Yong replied, "We men of honor only ask to glimpse the marshal's honored visage so that we may offer him our plea."

"Who do you think you are?! How dare you ask to see the marshal?!" the chamberlain shouted, and that was immediately backed up by the various imperial officers with a shout of "Silence!"

But Song Jiang pressed his case and said, "We would like to invite the marshal to come ashore temporarily, so that we may discuss something."

“Stop your nonsense!” the chamberlain barked. “The marshal is an official on imperial business. How can he discuss anything with you?!”

“Well, if his honor refuses to meet with us, then I fear my subordinates might startle him,” Song Jiang said. At that, the chieftain Zhu Tong waved a small flag, and right on cue, hundreds of bandits appeared on the bank, with arrows nocked and aimed at the ships. That sent all the boatmen on the ships scrambling into the cabins for shelter, and the chamberlain was also singing a different tune now. He rushed inside and told Marshal Su (4) the situation, and the marshal had no choice but to come out and sit down on a chair on the prow of his ship.

Song Jiang now made another deep bow and said, “We would never dare to cause any trouble.”

“Heroes, why are you blocking my ships?” Marshal Su (4) asked.

“We would never dare,” Song Jiang replied. “We just want to ask you to come ashore because we have a matter to discuss.”

“I have been sent by imperial decree to offer incense on Hua Mountain,” Marshal Su said. “What do we have to discuss? And how can a high minister of the imperial court leave the ship so lightly?”

“If your honor refuses, I fear my men would not take it well.”

As Song Jiang finished that sentence, Li Ying the Striking Hawk pointed with his spear, and the chieftains Li Jun (4), Zhang Shun (4), and Yang Chun (1) rowed out from hiding and approached the imperial ships. Before Marshal Su could even panic, Li Jun the River Dragon and Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves had leaped onto his ship with shimmering daggers. And before anyone could react, they had already grabbed two of the marshal’s officers and chucked them into the water.

“Stop! Do not startle our guest of honor!” Song Jiang shouted.

At that, Li Jun and Zhang Shun dove into the water, and in the next second, the two drenched officers were flung back onto the ship, and Li Jun and Zhang Shun leaped back onto the deck as well, looking as if they were just jumping from land.

Got the point? Marshal Su certainly did as he tried to steady himself from this little flex by the bandits. Song Jiang now shouted again, "Men, back off. Do not frighten our guest. Allow me to come help the marshal off the ship."

"Hero, if you have something to say, you can say it right here," Marshal Su said, fearing what might await him on land.

"This is no place to talk. Marshal. Please come to our base, and then we can discuss it. We mean you no harm. If we do, then may the spirits of the Hua Mountain smite us."

Well, at this point, it wasn't really up to the marshal anyway, so he had no choice but to leave his ship. Once he stepped on shore, the bandits helped him onto a horse, and the chieftains Hua Rong and Qin Ming escorted him toward Shaohua Mountain, followed by Song Jiang. Before he set out, Song Jiang instructed his men to take the marshal's whole entourage, including all the incense, sacrificial items, and those jazzy imperial golden bells, back to Shaohua Mountain as well. They left Li Jun and Zhang Shun, along with a hundred men, to guard the ships.

Once the bandits returned to their base on Shaohua Mountain, Song Jiang asked Marshal Su to sit down in the middle of the hall of honor, while the chieftains lined up on two sides. Song Jiang then dropped to his knees, kowtowed four times to the marshal, and said, "I was a minor official in Yuncheng County. Because I got into legal trouble, I had no choice but to become an outlaw and seek temporary refuge at Liangshan Marsh. I have been waiting for the court to grant me amnesty so that I may serve the country. Right now, I have two brothers who have been unjustly imprisoned by Prefect He (4) of Huazhou Prefecture. I would like to ask you to lend me your incense, sacrificial items, and the imperial golden bells so that I may deceive the prefect and save my brothers. Once the mission is accomplished, I will return everything to you. We will not do you any harm. I hope you will consent to it."

"But if you use my stuff and this comes out later, it will be trouble for me," Marshal Su said.

“When you get back to the capital, just blame everything on me,” Song Jiang said, which, yeah, I think the marshal was going to do that anyway.

In any case, Marshal Su knew that Song Jiang was just asking nicely and that this really wasn't up for debate. I mean, just look at all these other guys standing around. So Marshal Su agreed, and Song Jiang threw a feast and personally offered him a toast to thank him.

Then, the bandits, umm, borrowed the official clothing of all the men in the marshal's entourage. They picked a handsome bandit lackey and shaved his beard and dressed him up like Marshal Su. Song Jiang and Wu Yong dressed up like his chamberlains, while a bunch of other chieftains and lackeys also donned their disguises. They then took the marshal's banners, sacrificial items, incense, and golden bells. While a few other chieftains sat and drank with the marshal and his men, Song Jiang and company headed out toward the city. Two armies, one led by the chieftains Qin Ming and Huyan Zhuo and the other led by Yang Zhi and Lin Chong, made for the prefecture. Wu Song the Pilgrim, meanwhile, headed to the temple on Hua Mountain ahead of Song Jiang's group.

So Song Jiang and company got on the imperial ships and sailed down to the mouth of the river, where they got off. Instead of heading to the prefectural seat to meet Prefect He (4), they went straight to the temple on Hua Mountain. Dai Zong the Magic Traveler, in disguise, went on ahead to tell the folks at the temple that a VIP was coming, so they all came out to the bank of the river to welcome this marshal from the imperial court. The clerics carried all the sacrificial items to the temple, with the imperial golden bells leading the way.

The abbot now approached the ships to pay his respects to the marshal, but one of the chamberlains, aka Wu Yong, said, “The marshal fell ill on the way. Bring a sedan chair for him.”

So the men from the temple brought over a sedan chair, helped the marshal into it, and carried him all the way to the guest hall in the temple. Wu Yong now said to the abbot, “We have come with an

imperial decree to burn incense and hang up a set of golden bells to offer homage to the gods. Why isn't the local prefect here to welcome the marshal?"

"We have already dispatched a messenger; the prefect should be here soon," the abbot said.

Just then, a gaggle of about 70 people showed up, all carrying wine and fruits for the marshal. This was the local welcome wagon's vanguard, led by the public prosecutor, and the prefect would soon follow.

Now, the Liangshan bandits may have picked a lackey who looked like the marshal to take his place, but this lackey could not speak, because he would have a totally different accent, not to mention the fact that he would not know the appropriate language a high minister should use. That's why they claimed he was sick, and he just sat on a couch wrapped in a quilt. Still, the welcome wagon was fooled, since they saw that this group had all the authentic imperial gear.

The fake chamberlain Wu Yong now led the public prosecutor into the temple, where he stood at a distance and offered his respects to the marshal. The marshal said nothing and instead just gestured with his hand. Wu Yong now said to the public prosecutor, "The marshal is one of his majesty's trusted ministers. He has come all this way with an imperial decree to burn incense, and even fell ill on the way. Why did you local officials not come out to welcome him earlier?"

The public prosecutor answered, "Even though we did receive an official notice a while back, we had not gotten any updates recently. That's why we were tardy with our welcome. We did not expect that his honor would come to the temple first. Prefect He (4) would have come immediately, but right now the bandits on Shaohua Mountain have joined up with the bandits of Liangshan and are plotting to attack our city, so he must be on guard and did not dare to leave his post lightly. So he sent me to come first to present wine and gifts, and he will be along shortly."

But Wu Yong told him, "Well, the marshal will not drink a drop until your prefect shows up and conducts the proper ceremony."



The public prosecutor now offered these chamberlains and their men wine, and Wu Yong then produced a key and told the public prosecutor to follow him to see the imperial bells. He opened the lock, removed the bells from their scented bag, and hung them from a bamboo frame. These bells had hung in the center of the imperial palace's Hall of the Gods. They were of exquisite workmanship and had been made by the best craftsmen in the imperial palace. They were encrusted with pearls and precious jewels and had a red silk lantern suspended between them.

After sufficient ooh-ing and aah-ing, Wu Yong put the bells away and showed the public prosecutor all the paperwork that came with the bells. He then told the man to go back and bring the prefect here so they could conduct the proper ceremony and get on with the sacrifice. Seeing all this, the public prosecutor and his men promptly took their leave and returned to report to the prefect.

Watching those guys leave, Song Jiang secretly rejoiced that the deception worked. By now, Wu Song the Pilgrim had arrived outside the temple gates. Wu Yong sent another chieftain, Shi Xiu the Daredevil, to join him. He then sent Dai Zong to go talk to the abbot about arranging a meal, while everyone else prepared to conduct ... umm ... business. While he waited, Song Jiang took a stroll around the temple and admired its splendid, heavenly views.

As he returned to the main hall, a gatekeeper reported that Prefect He (4) had arrived. Song Jiang summoned his chieftains and they all lined up, ready to spring the trap.

Momentarily, Prefect rode up to the temple gates with 300 men. He dismounted and came in with his entourage. Seeing that the men were all armed, the fake chamberlain Wu Yong shouted, "A marshal of the imperial court is here. No one except the prefect may approach!"

So everybody stopped, and Prefect He alone went into the hall to pay his respects. The chamberlain invited him in, and he bowed to the fake marshal. But as he did so, Wu Yong said, "Prefect, do you know your offense?"

"I did not realize that your honor had arrived. Please forgive me," Prefect He said.

"The marshal came here with an imperial decree to offer incense. Why did you not welcome him earlier?" Wu Yong pressed.

"I did not receive any recent report on his honor's journey, so I neglected to welcome him," Prefect He explained.

Now, Prefect He may have thought that the marshal's staff was just putting on airs like all high officials' lackey were wont to do, maybe just to hit him up for a few coins. But Wu Yong was not playing.

"Seize him!" Wu Yong shouted.

Immediately, two chieftains, the hunter brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, stepped forth and pulled out daggers from under their clothes. Before Prefect He could react, they had sent him sprawling to the ground with one kick and cut off his head.

"Brothers, NOW!" Song Jiang shouted. All the chieftains pulled out their weapons and went to work on the 300-some men that the prefect had brought with him. Those guys were so stunned that they couldn't even move, and they started falling like dominoes. Some managed to escape out the temple gates, but they were met there by the chieftains Wu Song and Shi Xiu. Others ran to the back of the temple, but ran smack dab into the chieftains Zhang Shun and Li Jun. Before long, all 300-some men lay dead in the temple.

Song Jiang now ordered his men to quickly pack up all the imperial gear and return to their ships. They then sailed on to the city. By the time they approached Huazhou Prefecture, they saw that it was on fire. So I guess the two armies that had gone to attack the city did their job. Song Jiang and company now joined the melee, and they stormed into the prison and rescued Shi Jin and Lu Zhishen. They then emptied the city's storehouses and took everything back to the ships.

Once they returned to Shaohua Mountain, they “thanked” Marshal Su for his ... umm ... assistance. Not only did they return all his stuff, but Song Jiang also presented the marshal with a big platter of gold and silver, and all the marshal’s men got some money, too. They then threw a feast to see the marshal off before escorting him and his entourage back to their ships. See, just like we said. Not a single thing was missing, and not a single man was harmed, unless you count all those guys we killed at the temple and the city, which we don’t.

Once they bid goodbye to the marshal, Song Jiang and company returned to Shaohua Mountain and made the usual recruitment pitch to Shi Jin and his three bandit buddies about joining Liangshan. It was an easy call, and they immediately packed up their stuff, burned their stronghold to the ground, and followed Song Jiang and company back to Liangshan.

Meanwhile, Marshal Su made his way to Huazhou Prefecture just in time to see the carnage left by those men of honor. More than a hundred soldiers in the city had been killed, all the horses had been taken, and all the money and grain in the storehouses were gone as well. Oh, and there was that whole bloody mess in the temple on Hua Mountain. So the marshal told the public prosecutor to write a report to the Council of Administrator, to be relayed to the emperor. The report said, “Song Jiang robbed the imperial incense and hanging bells en route, and was thus able to lure the prefect to the temple and murder him.”

This done, the marshal went to the temple to complete his mission by offering incense and instructing the abbot to hang up the imperial bells. He then rushed back to the capital to inform the court of what happened.

Let’s now catch up with Song Jiang and company. After leaving Shaohua Mountain with their new recruits, they returned to Liangshan without incident. Seriously, no robbing or killing at all on the way. Dai Zong the Magic Traveler had gone on ahead with news of their success, so by the time they arrived

at the foot of the mountain, the leader Chao Gai and other chieftains were already waiting for them. They went up to the hall of honor, introduced the newcomers, and got down to the usual multi-day partying.

One day, they suddenly got intel from the chieftain Zhu Gui, who was running recon, that somebody somewhere was talking smack about us! So, apparently, in nearby Xuzhou (2,1) Prefecture, there was a Mangdang (2,4) Mountain, and a group of bandits had recently taken up residence there, totalling about 3,000 men. Their leader was named Fan (2) Rui (4), and he was a Daoist priest who was adept at controlling the weather and deploying troops, calling himself the Demon King of Chaos. That nickname takes its roots from a Buddhist term that refers to someone who wreaks havoc on others, essentially meaning the devil incarnate.

Below this Fan (2) Rui (4) were two other chieftains. One was named Xiang (4) Chong (1), with the moniker the Eight-Armed Nezha (2,4). Nezha is a deity in Chinese folk religions. He was a skilled warrior, and one of his powers was that he could sprout eight arms, which really comes in handy in a fight. This Xiang Chong wielded a shield in one hand with 24 throwing knives attached, and he could hit a man at 100 paces with those knives and never missed. In his other hand, he wielded an iron javelin.

The other chieftain was named Li (2) Gun (3), with the nickname the Sky-Soaring Great Sage. That nickname is a reference to the monkey king in one of the other great classic Chinese novels, the Journey to the West. Basically, the monkey king was nearly invincible, with an ego to match his powers, so he gave himself the lofty title of Great Sage Equal to Heaven. So basically, all three of these guys made up nicknames based on religious characters. And just to round out the symmetry, this Li Gun's weapons of choice mirrored his comrade Xiang Chong's. In one hand he wielded a shield with 24 darts, with which he could also hit a target at 100 paces without fail. In his other hand, he wielded a sharp sword.

So far, these three guys sounded like they would just fit right in with the rest of the gang on Liangshan, so what's the problem? Well, the problem was that they didn't want to be part of the gang. In fact, having grown tired of robbing and pillaging in their own neck of the woods, they were now talking about coming to take over the base at Liangshan. And they were apparently talking about it so loudly that the Liangshan spy network picked it up.

To see how our heroes will respond to these upstarts, tune into the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, our heroes get wind of more disrespect. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.