

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 85.

Last time, our heroes rescued a couple of their own from prison in Huazhou (2,1) Prefecture and left behind the usual bloody mess. Then, while they were still celebrating their victory, they got word that bandits on another mountain were talking smack about them and boasting about coming to take over their base. Given our heroes' honor-mad tendencies, I think we know what's coming. Just ask the poor saps currently trying to rebuild the Zhu (4) Family Manor.

"How dare these scoundrels be so rude?!" Song Jiang fumed when he heard about the disrespect from the rival gang of outlaws. "I must make another trip!"

But the new chieftain Shi Jin, he of the Nine Tattooed Dragons, stood up and said, "My three brothers and I just got here and have not yet rendered any service. We are willing to lead our own men and go capture those bandits."

Song Jiang was delighted by his eagerness, so Shi Jin called up the troops that had come with him from his old base, and set out with his buddies Zhu (1) Wu (3) the Resourceful Strategist, Chen (2) Da (2) the Stream-Leaping Tiger, and Yang (2) Chun (2), the White Flower Serpent. Within three days, they could see Mangdang (2,4) Mountain, the home of the upstart bandits. By the time Shi Jin arrived at the foot of the mountain, the resident bandits already knew they were there. Shi Jin lined up his troops and waited.

Before long, an army flew down from the mountain, led by the No. 2 and No. 3 chieftains, Xiang (4) Chong (1) the Eight-Armed Nezha (2,4), and Li (2) Gun (3) the Sky-Soaring Sage. Both of these guys and their men came on foot. When they saw their opponents, they didn't even bother trading insults. One of the lackeys started banging a gong, and Xiang Chong and Li Gun raised their shields and charged into the enemy lines. Shi Jin and company were caught off guard by the fierceness of their attack. The rear column fell back first, and soon the rest of Shi Jin's troops collapsed into chaos as well, so they all turned tail and ran for about 10 miles. In the melee, Shi Jin nearly got struck by one of Xiang Chong's throwing

knives. His comrade Yang Chun wasn't quite so lucky. He was a step slow, and his horse got nailed by a throwing knife. So Yang Chun had to ditch his horse and run away on foot.

By the time they got away from their pursuers, Shi Jin and company had lost about half of their men. They were just about to send someone back to Liangshan to ask for reinforcements, but word came that about 2,000 troops were approaching on the main road from the north. Shi Jin and company went to take a look and saw that these were Liangshan forces led by the chieftains Hua Rong the archer and Xu (2) Ning (2) the Golden Lancer.

Shi Jin brought them up to speed on the situation. Hua Rong told him that Song Jiang had regretted not sending more men in the first place, so he dispatched these reinforcements. They now combined their forces and pitched camp.

The next morning, they were just about to go mount another attack when scouts reported that more troops were approaching from the north. This time, it was Song Jiang himself, along with the strategist Wu Yong, the Daoist priest Gongsun Sheng, and eight other chieftains and 3,000 men. I think somebody has trouble delegating responsibilities.

In any case, Shi Jin told Song Jiang about yesterday's defeat, and Song Jiang was quite alarmed. Wu Yong suggested they pitch camp first, but Song Jiang was eager to stage another battle, so he marched the troops straight to the foot of the mountain.

By now, it was starting to get dark, and they could see blue lanterns scattered around the mountain. Gongsun Sheng said, "Their base has blue lanterns; that must mean there is a sorcerer there. Let's fall back for now. Tomorrow I'll devise a formation to capture the two chieftains that beat our troops yesterday."

Song Jiang agreed and instructed his troops to fall back about seven miles and set up camp. The next morning in the command tent, Gongsun Sheng drew up a battle formation.

“This is the stone formation laid out by the strategist Zhuge Liang during the Three Kingdoms era,” he told Song Jiang and Wu Yong. “Let’s arrange our army into four groups and eight sections, each with eight companies, totaling 64. The commander-in-chief will be in the middle. This formation has 4 heads and 8 tails. It can turn in any direction like the wind and clouds above, and as quickly as any wild animal. When the enemy charges into our formation, our troops will part and let them in. Then, when our men see a seven-star banner waving, they shall turn our formation into the shape of a serpent. Then I will use my magic and trap the enemy inside the formation. Also, let’s dig a concealed pit and drive the enemy chieftains there. We will have men with hooks lying in wait, ready to capture them.”

So yeah, we have another Three Kingdoms reference here. If you listened to my Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast, then you might remember this formation. You would, of course, know that Zhuge Liang has a reputation as perhaps the most brilliant military strategist in Chinese history.

Song Jiang was delighted with this plan, so he ordered his men to follow Gongsun Sheng’s instructions. He assigned eight chieftains to lead the troops in the formation, while stationing Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind and the halberd twins Lü Fang and Guo Sheng in the center. Song Jiang, Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng, along with the chieftain Chen Da the Stream-Leaping Tiger, manned the flags, while the chieftain Zhu Wu led five soldiers onto a nearby hill to get a big-picture view of the situation.

Around 9 a.m. that morning, the Liangshan troops approached Mangdang (2,4) Mountain and lined up according to plan. They then beat their drums and waved their banners, challenging for battle. From atop the mountain came the reply in the form of earthshaking clangs from 30-some gongs. All three resident chieftains came down with 3,000-some men. The chieftains Xiang (4) Chong (1) and Li Gun (3) led the flanks, while in the center came their leader Fan (2) Rui (4), seated atop a black horse. He was a Daoist priest in his youth and later picked up some good fighting skills while bouncing around the jianghu scene. He wielded a hammer on a chain and was so handy with it that no foe dared to get close to him.

Now, this Fan Rui may have known magic, but he apparently didn't know anything about battle formations, because when he saw Song Jiang's troops lined up in some kind of formation, he secretly rejoiced, thinking, "You've played right into my hands!"

He told his two comrades, "When the wind starts to blow, you two charge into their formation with 500 swordsmen." He then held his hammer in his left hand and his sword in his right, muttered an incantation, and shouted, "Speed!"

In an instant, a wild wind whipped up, sending pebbles and sand flying and blocking out the sky. His comrades Xiang Chong and Li Gun now let out a cry and charged toward the Liangshang troops with 500 swordsmen. As soon as they approached the lines, the Liangshang forces parted. Xiang Chong and Li Gun charged right into the gap, but as soon as they entered, the Liang troops started firing arrows and crossbows at the rest of their men, repelling most of them. Only about 50 people managed to make it into the formation with their leaders.

Watching from a nearby hill, Song Jiang now ordered his men to wave the seven-starred banner. Immediately, the formation shifted into the shape of a long serpent. Xiang Chong and Li Gun charged to and fro within the formation, but could not find their way. Meanwhile, the Liang chieftain Zhu Wu was observing their every move from another hilltop and signaled the troops to go in whichever direction that the two enemy chieftains were going in.

And now, the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Gongsun Sheng, watching from another high vantage point, pulled out his sword and cast a spell of his own. The wild wind that had been blowing now followed Xiang Chong and Li Gun everywhere inside the formation, swirling at their feet, obstructing their view. The two of them saw nothing except black vapor. They could not see a single enemy soldier, nor could they see any of their own men.

Xiang Chong and Li Gun started to panic and tried to find a way out of the formation. Just as they were stumbling around, they heard a loud quake under their feet, and before they could go "Oh crap!",

the ground beneath them caved in, and they fell into a pit. In the next moment, a swarm of Liangshan soldiers had descended, latching onto them with hooks, pulling them out of the pit, and tying them up. The troops then took them up to the nearby hilltop to see Song Jiang, who pointed with his whip and sent his troops charging at the enemy chieftain Fan Rui and his remaining troops. Fan Rui scrambled back up his mountain, but not before losing more than half of his men.

Resounding victory in hand, Song Jiang called back his army and all the chieftains sat down in the main tent. Soldiers now brought in the captured chieftains Xiang Chong and Li Gun. Song Jiang quickly ordered his men to untie the two and personally poured them wine, saying, "Heroes, please don't be angry. We had no choice but to do so on the field of battle. I have long heard of your great names and wanted to come invite you to join us on Liangshan in the name of honor, but I haven't had the opportunity. If you do not think us unworthy and would consent to return to our stronghold with us, it would be our great fortune."

When they heard that, Xiang Chong and Li Gun fell to their knees and said, "We have long heard of the Timely Rain. We just haven't had the good fortune to meet you until now. Turns out you really are a man of honor. We were blind to go against heaven and earth. Today, we are your prisoners. But instead of killing us, you have treated us with such courtesy. If you would spare us, we swear that we shall repay your kindness with our lives! And that Fan Rui can do nothing without the two of us. If you would be willing to let one of us go back to our base, we can convince him to come submit to you. What do you think?"

"Heroes," Song Jiang said, "there's no need for one of you to stay here as a hostage. Both of you can go back to your base. I will wait for word from you tomorrow."

Xiang Chong and Li Gun bowed again in gratitude and said, "You are a true man! If Fan Rui refuses to surrender, then we will apprehend him and offer him to you."

Song Jiang was delighted and treated the two to food and wine, as well as a new set of clothes and two fine horses. He then gave them back their weapons and saw them out. As the two men headed back to base, they could not help but talk of Song Jiang's kindness. When they arrived at the foot of the mountain, their own lackeys were stunned to see them and brought them back up to the stronghold.

When Fan Rui asked what they were doing back here, the two men said, "We all deserve to die for opposing heaven!"

"Brothers, why do you say such a thing?" Fan Rui asked.

The two men then sang Song Jiang's praises, and that was good enough for their leader.

"Since Song Jiang is so virtuous and honorable, then we must not go against heaven's will," Fan Rui said. "Let us go submit to him first thing tomorrow."

So it was agreed. They packed up their belongings that night, and when morning came, the three chieftains headed down the mountain and kneeled in front of Song Jiang's camp. Song Jiang helped them up and asked them to sit down in the main tent. Seeing that he was all sincerity, the three men responded in kind, pouring out their hearts to him and inviting everyone up to their base for a feast.

After the feast, Fan Rui pledged himself as a pupil to Gongsun Sheng, and Song Jiang asked the latter to teach Fan Rui the Divine Method for Summoning the Five Thunderbolts, which delighted Fan Rui greatly. Over the next few days, they packed up all the money, provisions, and livestock on the mountain, burned their base to the ground, and followed Song Jiang back to Liangshan.

Within a couple days, they arrived at the edge of Liangshan Marsh. They were just about to get on boats when suddenly, they saw a big man on the side of the road, kneeling and bowing to Song Jiang. Song Jiang quickly dismounted, helped the man up, and asked for his name.

"My name is Duan (4) Jingzhu (3,4)," the guy said. "Because I have red hair and a yellow beard, people call me the Golden-Haired Hound. I make my living as a horse thief in the northern borderlands.

This spring, I managed to steal a fine steed. It was as white as snow, with not a single off-color hair on its whole body. It was a tall and strong horse that can travel 300-some miles a day. It's known throughout the North as the White Jade Lion that Glows in the Night. It belonged to a prince of the Jin (1) Kingdom. It was grazing at the foot of a hill when I stole it."

So, the Jin (1) Kingdom he mentions here lies in the region that is now China's northeast tip and parts of Russia. At this time, directly to the north of the Song Dynasty's territory lay the kingdom of Liao (2), which was ruled by the Khitan people. To the north of that lay the kingdom of Jin (1), which was ruled by the Jurchen people. The Jurchens used to be vassals of the Liao kingdom, but in the year 1115, so not too long before the time of our novel, the Jurchen tribes united and declared their independence from the Liao. Eventually, they are going to conquer the Liao and then sack the Northern Song capital, putting an end to the Northern Song. The Jin would become a major geopolitical force in the 12th century before they and everybody else got overrun by the Mongols.

Ok, history lesson over, back to our story. The horse thief Duan (4) Jingzhu (3,4) now continued: "I have long heard of the Timely Rain, but had no means of introducing myself to you, so I wanted to offer you that horse to express my desire to join you. But when I was passing through the Zeng (1) Village in the southwestern part of Lingzhou (2,1) Prefecture, the Five Tigers of the Zeng (1) Family took the horse from me. I tried to tell them that it belonged to Song Jiang of Liangshan, but those knaves spewed such offensive insults that I do not dare to repeat them. In any case, I managed to escape and came to tell you."

Song Jiang sized up this horse thief. He was thin and rough-looking, but also had an uncommon appearance that impressed Song Jiang. So he told Duan Jingzhu to accompany them back to Liangshan first. They all boarded the boats and rowed over to Golden Sand Beach, where the leader Chao Gai and other chieftains welcomed them back. Song Jiang introduced the three new chieftains from Mangdang Mountain, as well as the horse thief Duan Jingzhu. This, of course, was accompanied by the customary

feast. While they were partying, Song Jiang also gave orders to build additional quarters to house all the new troops.

Once the newcomers were settled, Duan Jingzhu again mentioned the horse, so Song Jiang sent Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to go check things out at this upstart Zeng (1) Village. Dai Zong returned five days later and made his report.

So, if you take the now vanquished Zhu (4) Family Manor, increase the number of sons by 66 percent and quadruple the antagonistic tendencies, you pretty much have Zeng (1) Village. There are 3,000 households in this village, led by a family named, what else, Zeng. The patriarch of this Zeng family was from the Jin kingdom, so he's presumably Jurchen. He's called Zeng the Elder, and he has five sons, who are known as the Five Tigers of the Zeng Family. They also have a lead arms instructor named Shi (3) Wengong (2,1), and an assistant arms instructor named Su (1) Ding (4). And here's the part where these guys were really asking for it.

"They have gathered about 7,000 troops," Dai Zong said. "They've set up military camps and constructed 50-some prisoner carts. They have sworn to be our archnemesis and declared that they will capture all of our chieftains. That fine horse they took now belongs to their arms instructor Shi Wengong. And there's something even more despicable. They've taught all the kids in their village a rhyme. It goes:

When our horses' bridles jingle,  
Gods and demons with fear tingle.  
Iron carts plus iron locks,  
Prisoners nailed in iron stocks.  
Liangshan Marsh we'll cleanly flush,  
Chao Gai to the capital we'll rush,



And capture Timely Rain -- that's Song,  
And his strategist Wu Yong.  
The Five Zeng tigers will boldly stand,  
Famed far and wide throughout the land."

So, if these guys were looking for trouble, then congratulations, they've got trouble. As soon as he heard that last part, the bandit leader Chao Gai flew into a rage.

"How dare those animals be so rude! I must go there in person. I swear I will not return unless I capture them!"

Song Jiang, however, intervened and said, "Brother, you are our leader and must not leave the stronghold lightly. I am willing to go instead."

"No, brother!" Chao Gai said. "I'm not trying to steal your glory, but you have gone on many missions and must be tired after all those battles. Let me go in your place this one time. The next time, it'll be your turn again."

Song Jiang tried time and again to dissuade Chao Gai, but the latter's mind was made up. Chao Gai called up 5,000 troops along with 20 chieftains, led by the likes of Lin Chong the Panther Head, Huanan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, the three Ruan Brothers, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil, and so on. The rest of the chieftains would stay behind and defend the base.

Chao Gai's army set out in three columns. Song Jiang and company saw them off at Golden Sand Beach. Just as they were sharing a few cups of wine, a sudden gale kicked up and snapped one of Chao Gai's new command banners. As far as terrible omens go, this was as bad it could get, and everyone turned pale at the sight of the broken banner.

"This is an ominous sign," Wu Yong said to Chao Gai. "Brother, you should delay the expedition."

Song Jiang also chimed in and said, "Brother, you are just setting out and the wind has snapped your banner. This is not a good sign for the army. Why not wait for a while and then deal with those knaves?"

But Chao Gai waved them off. "What's there to be so alarmed about. It's just some weather. Right now it's spring time and warm. If we don't go attack them now and instead let them build up their strength, then it would be too late. Don't try to stop me. My mind is made up!"

Despite repeated entreaties from Song Jiang, Chao Gai pressed on and crossed the marsh with his army. Song Jiang returned unhappily to the stronghold and dispatched Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to check for news on the expedition.

As for Chao Gai and company, they marched to Zeng Village and set up camp outside. The next day, Chao Gai and the other chieftains rode out to check out the village and saw that it was very well fortified. It was surrounded by a body of water, and flanked by high peaks on three sides. The waterways were numerous and tangled, and the surrounding woods were so thick that you could not see any houses.

Just as they were scouting out the place, they saw an army of 800 men dart out from the forest of willow trees. The man at their head wore a bronze helmet and a suit of chain-linked armor. He wielded a steel spear and rode a stout war horse. This was the Zeng family's fourth son, Zeng Kui (2).

"You bandits!" Zeng Kui shouted. "I was just about to come capture all of you and turn you in for a reward. But now, heaven has made it even easier. Dismount and surrender now!"

Chao Gai flew into a rage, and from behind him, a chieftain had already galloped out to take on Zeng Kui (2). This was Lin Chong the Panther Head. He and Zeng Kui traded blows for 20-some bouts without a winner. But Zeng Kui was getting the feeling that he was not going to be able to keep going toe to toe with Lin Chong, so he turned and galloped back into the woods, and Lin Chong did not give chase.

After returning to camp, Chao Gai and the chieftains discussed their next move. Lin Chong suggested that they go to the front of the village tomorrow morning to challenge for battle, so they can get a good look at the enemy's strength, and then figure out a plan. So the next morning at daybreak, the 5,000 Liangshan troops lined up on the flat plains outside the entrance to the village and started beating drums and shouting battle cries to challenge for combat.

Momentarily, a cannon blast rang out from the village, and a large army emerged, led by a row of seven warriors. In the middle was the Zeng family's lead arms instructor Shi Wengong, seated atop the horse that was meant for Chao Gai. Shi Wengong wore a bow and a quiver of arrows, and wielded a halberd. He was flanked by the assistant instructor Su (1) Ding (4) and the five sons of the family.

After three rounds of drums, the men on the Zeng family's side pushed out a bunch of prisoner carts and parked them on the front line. The eldest son, Zeng Tu (2), pointed toward the Liangshan army and cursed: "Rebels! Do you see our prisoner carts? If we kill you, then we are no hero. We are going to capture you one by one, put you in the carts, and wheel you to the capital, where they will cut you to pieces. If you hurry up and surrender right now, then we might show you some mercy."

Those words left Chao Gai fuming, and he personally rode out with spear in hand to take on Zeng Tu. The rest of the chieftains were afraid he might slip up, so they all swept forward, and the two sides clashed. After scrumming for a bit, the Zeng family's forces started slowly backtracking into the village as they fought. Chao Gai pressed forward, flanked by Lin Chong and Huyan Zhuo. Soon, though, the roads became difficult to traverse, so Lin Chong quickly ordered the troops to fall back.

The day ended with both sides suffering some losses, and Chao Gai was in a foul mood when he returned to camp. The other chieftains tried to console him, telling him, "Don't worry or you'll harm your health. When Brother Song was leading us on campaigns, he, too, suffered some setbacks, but he always returned in victory. Both sides lost some troops in today's melee, but we didn't lose the battle, so what's there to be worried about?"

Still, Chao Gai remained unhappy. For the next three days, he went and challenged for battle, but not a single soul came out from the village to answer his call.

On the fourth day, two monks arrived in camp and paid their respects to Chao Gai. They kneeled and said, "We are monks from a monastery to the east of the village. The Five Tigers of the Zeng Family always come to stir up trouble and extort money from us. There's nothing they won't do. But we know the ins and outs of their defenses and have come to lead you to raid their camp. When you purge them, it would be a boon to our monastery."

Chao Gai was delighted and offered the monks wine. But Lin Chong cautioned, "Brother, don't listen to them. This might be a trick."

"We are men of religion, how would we dare to lie?" the monks protested. "We have long heard of the honor and benevolence of the heroes of Liangshan. Wherever you guys go, you never disturb the civilians. So we came to help you. How could you say that we have come to deceive you? Besides, the Zeng family could hardly defeat you, so what's there to be suspicious about?"

Chao Gai now told Lin Chong, "Don't get paranoid and miss an opportunity. I will go tonight."

"Brother, you shouldn't go," Lin Chong objected. "Give me half the troops, and I will go raid their camp. You wait outside as backup."

"If I don't go, then who would put themselves forward?" Chao Gai said. "You can take half the men and wait outside as backup."

So Chao Gai called up 2,500 men and 10 chieftains for a night raid. To see how his attack will pan out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, our heroes set their sights on a high-profile recruit. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!