

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 105.

Last time, we followed good ol' Black Whirlwind on a couple more mini-misadventures before returning to Liangshan. Those ended up being just two of the many complaints about Liangshan that were streaming into the imperial court. So the emperor asked his officials what they should do about these guys.

The inspector general stepped forth and said, "I have heard that Liangshan has erected a huge banner that says "Delivering justice on heaven's behalf." That is an attempt to get the people on their side. Since the civilians respect them, we must not apply military force. Also, right now, the Liao kingdom is encroaching on our borders, and our armies are stretched thin. If we wage war on the bandits, it would cause even more inconvenience. In my foolish opinion, these desperados are committing crimes because they previously broke the law and have no other way out. If you would issue a decree of amnesty, along with imperial wine and food, and send a high minister to Liangshan to deliver the amnesty and some kind words, it would induce them to surrender. Then you can send them to take on the Liao kingdom's forces. That would serve public and private interests. Please take the appropriate steps."

The emperor agreed with this suggestion and tabbed a certain Marshal Chen (2) to be his envoy, armed with a decree of amnesty and the aforementioned imperial wine and food. So Marshal Chen went home and prepared for the trip. As he was packing, a lot of colleagues dropped by to congratulate him. They told him, "You are going on official state business to help alleviate the people's concerns. Liangshan values loyalty and honor and is just waiting for an amnesty from the court. You should sweet-talk them to make them feel reassured. And then your name will be praised for ages."

Just then, the right-hand man of the premier Cai Jing came by and said that Premier Cai wanted a word with the marshal. So Marshal Chen got in his sedan chair and went to the premier's residence. Once he paid his respects and they sat down and drank tea, Premier Cai said, "I heard that his majesty is

sending you to issue an amnesty to Liangshan. So I invited you here to remind you: Do not forget the rules of the court or the laws of the country. You remember what the Analects of Confucius say: 'When on a mission, wherever you go, do not abuse the sovereign's command, and be a worthy emissary.' "

Marshal Chen, of course, respectfully asked the premier for his advice.

"I'll send my right-hand man with you," Premier Cai said. "He is well-versed in the law and can remind you if you overlook anything."

So, while everybody else was advising Marshal Chen to butter up the bandits on this trip, here was Premier Cai, pushing the hardliners' stance and sending his own man along to make sure Marshal Chen didn't forget about it. Marshal Chen thanked the premier and left with the premier's right-hand man and returned home. He had barely sat down when his attendant came in and said that Marshal Gao Qiu was calling. Take one guess what he was there about.

Once Marshal Chen welcomed Gao Qiu into the parlor and exchanged some pleasantries, Gao Qiu said, "If I had been at court when the matter of amnesty for Song Jiang came up today, I would have advised against it. That outlaw has humiliated the court time and again, and his crimes are severe. If we pardon these criminals and bring them to the capital, they will surely become a problem. I was waiting for an opportunity to bring my concerns to his majesty, but he had already issued his decree. Well, we'll see what happens. If these bandits still show no conscience and disrespect the imperial decree, then you should hurry back. I will then petition his majesty to mobilize a large army, and I will personally lead it to wipe out the bandits, roots and all. I have an officer in my service who is a smooth talker. Let him accompany you on this trip; he'll be a good helper."

Great. Just what Marshal Chen needed. Another "helper." But he of course knew who the emperor's favorites were, so he played nice and thanked Gao Qiu, who then took his leave.

The next day, both of Marshal Chen's unsolicited helpers — Officer Zhang (1) from the premier and Officer Li (3) from Gao Qiu — reported for duty. Marshal Chen rounded up his traveling party, and they prepared 10 fine bottles of imperial wine, which were carefully stored in imperial containers with yellow flags on them. Remember from our supplemental episode on food that the palace had its own brewer, so being offered a sip of the imperial vintage was no small thing, hence the big to-do about delivering the emperor's microbrew as part of the amnesty offer. Marshal Chen and his entourage of five or six people, as well as his two new best friends, got on their horses and rode out, with the emperor's decree leading the way, and some of the officials came to see them out through the gates of the capital.

Marshal Chen and his party now traveled to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture, within whose borders Liangshan was situated. The local prefect, a Prefect Zhang, welcomed them and prepared a banquet. He then asked about the mission, and Marshal Chen relayed all the preparations that had been undertaken.

"In my foolish opinion," Prefect Zhang said, "granting them amnesty is the best course of action. But there's just one thing. When you arrive at their base, you must treat them kindly and sweet-talk them to make sure the mission is a success. There are some hot-tempered men in that group. If you accidentally offend them, it would jeopardize the mission."

That sounds like sensible advice and in line with what quite a few of Marshal Chen's colleagues had told him before he left. But, a couple folks in attendance were not having any of it. These were, of course, Officer Zhang and Officer Li, the helpers added to the party by Premier Cai and Marshal Gao Qiu.

"With the two of us accompanying Marshal Chen, nothing will be amiss," they scoffed at the prefect. "You preach being careful and gentle with the bandits, but what about the dignity of the court? With these low-lives, you have to keep them down constantly. If you ease up on them even a little, it will set a bad example for others."

"Who are these two?" Prefect Zhang asked Marshal Chen.

Marshal Chen explained that they were helpers so helpfully assigned to the mission by officials who can squish you and me like bugs, and Prefect Zhang said, "Maybe it would be best if they didn't go with you?"

"They are confidants of Premier Cai and Marshal Gao," Marshal Chen said. "If I don't take them along, it will raise suspicions."

"I offer my advice only for the good of the mission; I would hate for you to go for nothing," Prefect Zhang said.

"With the two of us here, nothing will go wrong," Officer Zhang bragged. The prefect kept his mouth shut and just tended to setting up the banquet. After the feast, Marshal Chen and company went to rest in the guest quarters, and the next day, they dispatched a messenger to Liangshan to let the bandits know what was coming.

Now, Song Jiang had already caught wind of this, thanks to the Liangshan spy network. He wasn't sure yet whether it was for real, but in his heart, he was very excited. Then, that day, the messenger from Jizhou Prefecture arrived in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor and said, "The court has sent Marshal Chen to deliver 10 bottles of imperial wine and a decree of amnesty. He has already arrived at the prefectural seat. You should prepare to receive him."

Song Jiang was ecstatic. He wined and dined the messenger and rewarded him with some silver and bolts of fabric, and sent him back. He then said to his chieftains, "Once we accept the amnesty, we will be servants of the state. All our suffering has not been in vain; it's finally borne fruit!"

Now, I can only imagine most of the chieftains present looking up from their daily feast and thinking, "What the hell are you talking about?" But the strategist Wu Yong was the first to speak. He said with a chuckle, "In my view, this offer of amnesty will not succeed. Even if we accept it, they will still view us as mere thugs. We should wait for them to come here with an army, give them a beating so bad that they

will be scared even in their dreams. If we accept the amnesty at that point, THEN we would be doing it in style.”

Song Jiang was mortified by this suggestion. Coming to blows with the imperial court would make a farce out of the whole loyalty and honor angle, and that’s our brand!

But Lin Chong the Panther Head chimed in, “The court officials coming here must be up to something. This is not necessarily a good thing.”

Guan Sheng the Great Saber spoke up as well. “That decree must have some stern-sounding language designed to scare us.”

Xu Ning the Golden Lancer went next. “The envoy must be one of Marshal Gao’s men.”

Song Jiang told them, “Don’t be so suspicious. Just focus on getting ready to receive them.” He then ordered a banquet, and put Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind in charge of preparations for the reception, all of which must naturally be first class. He also sent four chieftains, Pei (2) Xuan (1) the Iron-Faced Scribe, Xiao (1) Rang (4) the Sacred-Handed Scholar, and the halberd twins Lü (3) Fang (1) and Guo (1) Sheng (4), to go wait for the envoy about six or seven miles away from the base.

As part of the preparations, the naval chieftains got some large boats ready on the far bank of the marsh. As they waited, they got a set of orders from Wu Yong, along with the message, “Do as I tell you; it’s the only way.”

The four chieftains in the welcome party, led by Xiao Rang the Sacred-Handed Scholar, went forth with only about five or six lackeys and no weapons. They carried wine and fruit and waited about seven miles away from Liangshan. Later that day, they saw the envoy’s traveling party approaching. Marshal Chen was riding on horseback, while his two helpers were walking in front. Behind them followed an entourage of about 300. In front of that throng were a dozen or so officials and officers from the prefecture. Behind them came the imperial wine bearers, and then a rider carrying the imperial decree,

which was in a casket strapped to his back. Behind this came about 60 jailers from the prefecture. These guys were just tagging along, hoping to pick up some graft on a day when gifts were likely to be handed out liberally.

The Liangshan welcome party met them on the road and kneeled to pay their respects. But one of Marshal Chen's helpers, Officer Zhang, barked at them, "Who the hell does that Song Jiang think he is? Why did he not personally come to welcome the emperor's decree? That is disrespecting his majesty. You all are all condemned criminals, how can you receive amnesty? Marshal, let's turn back!"

The four chieftains in the welcome party kneeled and said apologetically, "Because the court had not sent any decrees to our base, we were not sure whether the news was real. Song Jiang and all the chieftains are waiting to welcome you at Golden Sand Beach. Marshal, please ease your thunderous anger and forgive us, for the sake of helping the state accomplish a good thing."

The other helper, Officer Li, now scoffed, "Even if this doesn't work out, it's not like we have to worry about you crooks escaping."

The halberd twins took exception to that slight, but the other two chieftains checked them. They then presented the wine and fruit that they had brought, but the helpers declined. Alrighty then. The entourage now traveled to the edge of the marsh, where Liangshan had prepared three large warships, one for the horses, one for their own welcome party, and one for the marshal and his companions, as well as the imperial decree and the imperial wine.

The ship for the marshal was commanded by the youngest Ruan (3) brother, Ruan Xiaoqi. He was sitting on the prow of his ship, accompanied by 20-some sailors, each of whom wore a dagger around his waist. Marshal Chen stepped onto the ship. Trying to maintain the dignity of the court, he acted very lofty and aloof and sat down in the middle of the vessel.

Ruan Xiaoqi gave the order and his men started rowing. As they rowed, they started singing, but of course one of the helpers had a problem with this. Officer Li now cursed, "You country mules! You have a VIP here. Show some respect!"

When the sailors ignored him and kept rowing and singing, Officer Li raised his whip and threatened to hit them. No one was intimidated, however, and a few even told him to mind his own business.

"You cockroaches! How dare you talk back to me?!" Officer Li cursed as he swung his whip in their direction. In that very instant, all the sailors leaped into the water.

"Great! You chased off my sailors! Now how is this ship supposed to move?" Ruan Xiaoqi complained.

Suddenly, he shouted, "The ship is leaking!" And sure enough, the ship's hold was rapidly filling with water. Just then, two Liangshan boats sped this way. Ruan Xiaoqi called them over. They quickly helped Marshal Chen onto one of the rescue boats, and everyone else got on board as well and the boats set off toward Liangshan.

That left just Ruan Xiaoqi on the sinking ship. But hey, guess what? The ship wasn't really sinking. Ruan Xiaoqi had purposely flooded his hold halfway before they set out, and then he just pulled out a plug and pretended that the ship was leaking. So now, it was just him, his sailors who had jumped into the water, and oh hey, the imperial decree and wine that nobody thought to grab in the chaos to evacuate!

Once the rescue boats were out of sight, Ruan Xiaoqi called his sailors back onto the ship. After they released the water from the hold and mopped the deck dry, he told his men, "Bring me one of those bottles of imperial wine and let me have a taste first."

So his men brought him a bottle and opened the seal. Ruan Xiaoqi took one whiff and the fragrance was so strong that it went straight up his nose.

"Hmm, this could be poisoned. Let me take one for the team and have a taste first," he said.

There were no bowls on board, so he just chugged it straight from the bottle.

“Not bad at all,” he said after emptying the bottle. Well, I guess the wine wasn’t poisoned, because he immediately called for a second bottle, which he promptly emptied and called for another, and then another. By the time he stopped putting himself in danger for the greater good, he had drunk four of the ten bottles that Marshal Chen had brought.

“Uh oh, what do we do now?” Ruan Xiaoqi asked his men.

One of them pointed out that they had a bucket of home brew on board, and that gave Ruan Xiaoqi an idea.

“Bring me a ladle, and I’ll let you all have a taste,” he told his men.

And so he and his sailors helped themselves to the other six bottles of imperial wine. They then refilled all 10 bottles with a combination of the home brew and water from the swamp, replaced the seal, and put the bottles back in their boxes. They then rowed extra fast and made it over to Golden Sand Beach just in time to catch up with Marshal Chen and company.

Song Jiang and the other chieftains met their special guests on the beach with candles, incense, and blaring gongs, drums, and other instruments. They put the bottles of imperial wine and the decree on tables, and four men carried each table off the ship.

When Marshal Chen got off his boat, Song Jiang met him and fell to his knees, saying, “I am a lowly clerk and a criminal who has committed countless offenses. I have caused you to go through the trouble of coming here, and my reception is insufficient. Please forgive me.”

Before Marshal Chen could say anything, Officer Li cut in. “The marshal is a high minister of the imperial court, and he came here to grant you amnesty. That is no small matter! How can you let him ride on a leaky boat steered by village crooks? You almost killed him!”



Song Jiang was befuddled. “We have plenty of good ships. How would we dare to use a leaky boat to ferry his lordship?”

Officer Zhang scoffed, “The marshal’s clothes got wet. How can you deny it?!”

Now, behind Song Jiang stood his Five Tiger Generals and his Eight Cavalry Commanders, and they did not take too kindly to these two guys putting on airs and talking down to Song Jiang. They would have cut off those two guys’ heads already if not for Song Jiang standing between them.

Anyway, Song Jiang now asked the marshal to get into a sedan chair and go up to the base to read the decree. The marshal got into the sedan chair only after being asked four or five times. Song Jiang also had his men bring over two horses for the marshal’s two helpers, who of course kept acting like big shots. Song Jiang then got back on his own horse, and the entire party went up the mountain to the sound of blaring music. They went through the three mountain passes and headed to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, with Song Jiang and all his chieftains following behind the marshal.

Once in the hall, they put the imperial wine and decree at the front. The marshal and his two helpers stood on the left side, while the chieftains Xiao Rang and Pei Xuan stood on the right. Song Jiang now did a head count of his chieftains, and came up with 107, which was one short. The guy missing was Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. But you know, with these things, it’s probably better that Li Kui wasn’t there. All the other chieftains were dressed in light battle robes of lined silk, and they now kneeled and prepared to listen to the imperial decree.

Marshal Chen took the decree out of the casket and handed it to Xiao Rang the Sacred-Handed Scholar. Pei Xuan the Iron-Faced Scribe officiated over the ceremony. All the chieftains kowtowed to the imperial decree, and then Xiao Rang unrolled it and started reading. It said:

“The country is governed by both civil and military means. The ancient sage rulers used both ceremony and punitive wars to preserve their territory. Things could be easy or hard; people could be

wise or foolish. I, the emperor, have inherited my ancestor's grand empire, on which the sun and the moon always shine brilliantly, stretching so vast under the heavens, and there is none who does not pay me homage.

Recently, Song Jiang and company have gathered in the wilds, robbing and pillaging. I was going to suppress them with my army, but I was concerned that it would burden my people. So I have dispatched Marshal Chen to offer them amnesty. When they receive the decree, they must surrender all their grain, weapons, horses, and boats immediately, tear down their lair, and follow at once to the capital. Then I will pardon their crimes. If they still do not show any conscience and continue to disobey the law, then none shall be spared when my divine troops arrive. Out of mercy, I have sent this decree. Let it be known to all!

Issued in the early summer of the fourth month of the year 1121."

So, this was a lot of smack talk via imperial decree. And by the time Xiao Rang was done reading, every chieftain not named Song Jiang was looking quite pissed. Just then, someone leaped down from the rafters, ripped the decree out of Xiao Rang's hands, and tore it to shreds. This was none other than Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. He now turned and grabbed Marshal Chen and was about to pummel him, but Song Jiang and Lu Junyi rushed forward and wrapped up Li Kui, pulling him away from their VIP.

"Who the hell is that?! How dare he?!" Officer Li shouted.

Well, Officer Li should've kept his mouth shut. Li Kui was looking to take his anger out on somebody, and Officer Li just offered himself up for the punishment. The next thing you know, Li Kui had him by the hair and was pounding his head, asking, "Whose words are those in the decree?!"

"They are the words of the emperor!" Officer Zhang chimed in.

"That damn emperor doesn't recognize that we are all heroes here!" Li Kui said. "How dare he put on airs when he's the one asking us to accept amnesty?! Your emperor's name is Song. My brother's last

name is also Song! Why can't my brother be the emperor?! Don't you come rile up your daddy, or I just might kill all of your envoys!"

After this went on for a bit, everyone came and pulled Li Kui away and hustled him out of the hall. Uh, that went well.

Song Jiang now reassured Marshal Chen, "Please don't worry, and don't think anything of this. Please distribute the imperial wine so that they may all receive his majesty's kindness."

Song Jiang then called for a pair of ornately decorated cups and told the chieftain Pei Xuan, who was officiating, to open a bottle of the imperial brew and pour it into a larger vessel so that everyone could partake. But when they poured out the wine, they could see that it was just a simple village brew. They then opened the other nine bottles and emptied their content into the large wine vessel, and just like the first one, they were all crude country brew, plus a healthy dose of swamp water.

If the not-so-subtle language of the decree had everyone pissed, this just sent them all over the edge. I mean, you do NOT mess with our heroes' liquor! Everybody started walking out of the hall in a foul mood. Well, almost everyone. Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk grabbed his Buddhist staff and cursed, "Damn mothers! How dare you disrespect us, giving us piss water and telling us it's imperial wine?!"

At the same moment, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil and Wu Song the Pilgrim pulled out their blades, while Mu Hong the Unrestrained and Shi Jin the Nine Tattooed Dragons also started acting out. And a bunch of naval chieftains stomped off while cursing up a storm.

Seeing that things were getting out of hand, Song Jiang quickly stepped in to keep his men at bay. He ordered that the marshal be immediately escorted down the mountain, lest something happened to him. But now, most of the chieftains were getting rowdy, so Song Jiang and Lu Junyi had to personally ride with the marshal and his men, escorting them back to the foot of the mountain.

There, Song Jiang kowtowed again and begged the marshal's forgiveness. "It's not that we don't want to surrender," Song Jiang said, "but the official who drafted the decree do not understand who we are. If they could just reassure us with a few kind words, we would repay the country with our lives. Marshal, when you get back to court, please put in a good word for us."

Uhh, sure, a good word. Yeah, consider it done. Now, can we please get on the boat and sail away before the rest of your men hunt us down? Marshal Chen and his entourage hightailed it out of there and scrambled back to Jizhou Prefecture.

Once Song Jiang returned to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, he reassembled the chieftains and lectured them, saying, "Yes, the imperial decree was misguided, but you all were also too rash."

But Wu Yong the strategist said, "Brother, don't keep lying to yourself. There will be a time for amnesty, but you can't blame our brothers for getting mad. The court thinks nothing of us. And it's all a moot point now anyway. Just order our troops to get ready. Sooner or later, the court will send a large army to attack us. Let's crush them, and then discuss how to proceed."

Everyone agreed with Wu Yong, so they all broke up and went back to their camps to prepare.

Meanwhile, Marshal Chen fled back to Jizhou Prefecture and told the prefect what happened.

"You guys must have said something to offend them," Prefect Zhang lamented.

"I didn't even say a word; I won't have dared!" Marshal Chen protested.

"Well, in that case, it was all for naught, and the mission is a failure," Prefect Zhang said. "Marshal, you should rush back to the capital and inform his majesty without delay."

To see what happens once word of this debacle gets back to the capital, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, the imperial court decides that the Council of Military Affairs should try doing some work for a change. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!