

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 118.

Last time, Song Jiang and company continued to roll against the Liao forces, despite Lu Junyi's unit temporarily falling into a trap in a canyon. In the end, Song Jiang broke up the trap and sent the enemy fleeing. And now, they set their sights on the heart of the Liao kingdom.

"We must capitalize on this opportunity and capture Youzhou (1,1) Prefecture," the strategist Wu Yong said. "If we do that, then the Liao kingdom's fall will be imminent."

So Song Jiang first sent Lu Junyi and the other 12 chieftains who were trapped in the canyon back to Jizhou Prefecture to rest, while he and the rest of the army left their base at Lone Deer Mountain and marched on Youzhou Prefecture.

Inside the prefectural seat, the Liao vice commander, Commander He, was lamenting the loss of his two brothers in the previous battle when he got word that Song Jiang was coming for him. Then, urgent reports came from the sentries atop the city walls that two armies were riding toward the city. Commander He rushed to the top of the walls to have a look, but was relieved to see that the incoming troops were bearing Liao banners.

One of these two forces was a unit of about 5,000 men, led by the Liao prince consort, whose last name was Taizhen (4,1). The other army was led by a minister and top general named Li (3) Jinwu (1,3). He had under his command about 10,000 men, which he was using to encroach on the borders of the Song. When they heard about the Liao's recent losses, they rushed here to help.

Commander He now sent word to both armies, telling them, "Don't bother entering the city. Go lie in wait and rest behind the hills. When my forces engage the enemy outside the city, then you attack from the flanks."

As Song Jiang and his army approached Youzhou Prefecture, Wu Yong advised him, "If the enemy's gates are shut and they are inside the city, then it means they are not prepared. But if they come out to

face us, then they must have an ambush. We should divide our forces into three units. One will head straight for Youzhou Prefecture to face the oncoming enemy. The other two will provide support on the wings. If the enemy deploys their ambush, then our wings will face them.”

So Song Jiang assigned Guan Sheng the Great Saber to lead the left wing, and Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs to lead the right wing, each commanding about 10,000 men and proceeding along backroads through the hills. Song Jiang, meanwhile, led the main army and headed straight for Youzhou Prefecture.

When they got near, they came face to face with Commander He’s forces and squared off. Lin Chong the Panther Head rode out to take on Commander He, who turned and fled after not even five bouts. Song Jiang’s army gave chase, and Commander He, instead of fleeing into the city, led his army and ran around the city. Wu Yong shouted for Song Jiang to not pursue, but just then, the two Liao forces lying in wait charged out. Fortunately for Song Jiang, his two flanks rode up and fended off these two armies. The two sides now engaged in a huge melee. The ground became littered with the bodies of slain soldiers, and blood flowed like rivers.

After a while, the Song army gained the upper hand. Seeing this, Commander He tried to return to the city, but he was cut off by the chieftains Hua Rong the Archer and Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. He fell back toward the west gate of the city, but was met there by Dong Ping the General of Double Spears. They fought for a bit before Commander He fled to the south gate, but there he had to tangle with Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard.

So now, Commander He gave up trying to get back into the city. Instead, he turned toward the north and tried to make his getaway down a major thoroughfare. But he ran smack dab into Huang Xin (4) the Suppressor of Three Mountains. Commander He started to panic, and in that moment, Huang Xin’s saber caught his horse on the head, sending the horse to the ground. Commander He now abandoned his horse and fled on foot, but out charged the chieftains Yang Xiong the Sick Guan Suo and Shi Xiu the Daredevil, and they knocked him face down onto the ground. From behind came another chieftain, Song

Wan the Giant in the Clouds. Nobody wanted to squabble over who got credit for the kill, so they all ran Commander He through with their spears.

Seeing their commander killed, that unit of Liao soldiers scattered and fled. As for the two Liao reinforcement armies, they both saw which way the wind was blowing and fled as well, falling back behind the mountains.

So that left the city wide open for Song Jiang, and he promptly helped himself, leading his army through the gates. They pitched camp and posted the usual notices about how there would be no general slaughter of civilians today. They then dispatched an urgent message to ask Commissioner Zhao to dispatch troops to guard Jizhou Prefecture, send a naval unit to Youzhou Prefecture, and assign Lu Junyi to defend Bazhou (4,1) Prefecture. Commissioner Zhao was ecstatic about having conquered four major prefectures, so he sent word back to the court and mobilized the troops as Song Jiang had requested.

Back in the Liao capital, the Liao king was holding court and asking his officials what to do now that they have lost another critical city and that it was only a matter of time before the Song forces came knocking on the doors of the capital.

Commander Wuyan (4,2), his top military officer, said, "My lord, do not worry. I have wanted to lead our forces against the enemy time and again, but was stopped by someone each time. That allowed the enemy to build up their strength, leading to such calamity. I beg you to issue an edict, putting me in charge of our armies. I shall convene our forces, set out right away, and promise to capture Song Jiang and his chieftains and reclaim our cities."

The king consented and gave him all the swag of command, along with this order: "No matter if someone is royalty, no matter what army it is, they are all under your command. Mobilize your forces at once."

So Commander Wuyan went straight to the training grounds to assemble his officers and hand out orders for mobilizing his forces. Once he was done telling everyone what to do, his eldest son, whose name was Yanshou (2,4), said, "Father, while you assemble your army, let me lead some ferocious warriors, along with the armies of the prince consort and General Li (3) Jinwu (1,4) and go give those savages a beatdown at Youzhou Prefecture. Then, by the time you get there, it would be like catching a turtle in a jug, and you can wipe out the Song forces in one fell swoop."

Commander Wuyan agreed and gave his son Yanshou (2,4) 5,000 riders and 20,000 crack troops, making him the vanguard. His son set out at once, met up with the prince consort and the general Li Jinwu (1,4), and led a combined force of 35,000 toward Youzhou Prefecture.

Word of this soon trickled into Youzhou, where Song Jiang and his strategist Wu Yong convened to discuss their response.

"Let's lead our forces out of the city and set up a formation," Wu Yong said. "When the Liao forces get here, we will take them on slowly. If they can't get any advantage, they will naturally fall back."

So Song Jiang mobilized his troops and led them to a spot about three miles outside the city called Square Mountain. The terrain here was flat, and it was next to mountains and a river. Song Jiang now deployed his forces in a formation known as the Nine-Unit Octagon.

Soon, the Liao vanguard arrived in three detachments. Yanshou (2,4), Commander Wuyan's son, led a unit bearing black flags, while the prince consort and General Li Jinwu led forces bearing green and red flags, respectively. Now, Yanshou took after his father and was well-versed in battle formations. So when he saw the enemy lined up in a formation, he ordered his troops to halt and set up camp, while he himself climbed up a tall ladder, sized up the enemy formation, and started chuckling nonstop when he came down.

When his lieutenants asked him why he was chuckling, he said, "Who doesn't recognize a Nine-Unit Octagon formation? They can't fool anyone with that amateur formation. Let me give them a fright."

He now ordered his army to beat their drums and set up a command platform. He ascended the platform and waved two flags, moving his men this way and that, creating a formation of his own.

He then got on his horse and rode out to the front line. There, he shouted toward Song Jiang, "Who are you trying to fool with your Nine-Unit Octagon formation? Do you recognize my formation?"

Oh, so we're gonna have a nerd fight over battle formations, eh? Well, Song Jiang got a couple nerds of his own, so he ordered his men to erect a tall ladder, and he and his strategists Wu Yong and Zhu Wu climbed up and took a look.

Zhu Wu immediately recognized the formation and told Song Jiang, "That's called the Great Monad and Three Powers: Heaven, Earth, and Man."

So Song Jiang climbed back down, rode back out to the front lines, pointed his whip at Yanshou and shouted, "It's the Great Monad and Three Powers formation. What's the big deal?!"

"Watch me change it to something you don't recognize!" Yanshou shouted back. He then got back onto his own command platform, waved the flags around some more, and shifted his men into another formation. On the other side, Wu Yong and Zhu Wu were still watching from atop the tall ladder, and they passed along the answer to Song Jiang. Song Jiang waited for Yanshou to ride back out and then told him, "Yeah, it's the Four Elephants formation."

Yanshou chuckled and shook his head, and rode back into his lines to build another formation. But when he came back out, Song Jiang was like, "Yeah son. That's the Revolving Octagon. Yawn."

Yanshou now thought to himself, "Those formations were all taught to me in secret. Who knew he would recognize them all. The enemy must have someone formidable in their ranks."

Still not willing to concede defeat in this battle of the nerds, he shifted his formation yet again. This time, he built something that had no entrances on the outside and had 64 units of troops hidden on the inside.

On the other side, Zhu Wu recognized this formation and said to Wu Yong, "That is the famous Eight-Sector Diagram formation created by Zhuge Liang, but with the head and tail hidden so no one knows where they are."

So if you listened to my Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast, you would know Zhuge Liang's reputation as perhaps the greatest military genius in Chinese history. Wu Yong and Zhu Wu now called Song Jiang over and said, "Don't underestimate the enemy. Their formations are legit and exactly the way they have been taught traditionally. The transition from the Great Monad and Three Powers to the Four Elephants and to the Eight-Sector Diagram was a very skillful progression."

With that in mind, Song Jiang rode back out. Yanshou now asked him again if he recognized this latest formation, and Song Jiang shouted back, "You are young and unlearned. You are like a frog at the bottom of a well. You just know these formations and think you are hot stuff. Who are you trying to fool with this Eight-Sector Diagram with the head and tail hidden? You can't even fool the children of the Song!"

Yanshou was like, well then, why don't you do a formation and let me talk trash about it? But Song Jiang said, "My Nine-Unit Octagon formation may be simple, but do you dare to attack it?"

"What's so hard about that pitiful little formation?" Yanshou scoffed as he roared with laughter. "Don't take any cheap shots at me, and watch us attack your formation!"

He then told the prince consort and the general Li Jinwu, "Take 1,000 men each. Wait until I have disrupted their formation, and then come back me up."

And now, war drums rolled on both sides, and the Song forces' banners parted, opening a path to invite Yanshou to come try his luck. Yanshou accepted the challenge, charging out with his 20 lieutenants

and 1,000 armored cavalry. He calculated that this was a quote unquote “fire” day and so decided that a normal attack from due south would not be auspicious. Instead, he led his forces around to the left, toward the southwest, unfurled his white banners, and charged into the formation. But only half of his troops made it in with him; the rest were kept at bay by the enemy’s arrows and turned back toward their own lines.

Once inside the formation, Yanshou and his men charged toward the center, but suddenly found themselves surrounded by walls of silvery metal barricades. This put a fright into him. “Where did this come from?” he thought to himself.

He now ordered his men to retrace their steps and fight their way out of the formation, but when they turned around, all they saw was a misty silvery sea, and all they could hear was the sound of water, with no paths in sight. Yanshou panicked and led his men toward the south entrance. But there, they were greeted not by soldiers, but by rolling fireballs. Thus rebuffed, they turned toward the east entrance, but were blocked by brambles that covered the ground. When they headed north, they saw a dark fog block out the sun, making it impossible to see your own hand in front of your face, as if they were in hell.

As he stumbled around inside the formation, Yanshou said, “This must be Song Jiang’s black magic. Let’s not worry about which path is what. Just break out at all costs.”

His men followed his order, let out a mighty roar, and tried to push their way through the enemy lines. Just then, a general rode out, shouting, “You little weakling, where are you going?!”

This was Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs. As he spoke, he brought down his steel staffs toward Yanshou’s head. Yanshou barely had time to raise his halberd to block the blow, and when the weapons met, the halberd snapped in two. Before Yanshou could react, Huyan Zhuo had already pulled him off his saddle, capturing him alive. Seeing their commander get captured, the rest of the Liao forces inside the

formation surrendered. With mission accomplished, Gongsun Sheng the Daoist priest now stopped his wizardry, and all seemed normal again, as the sky and the sun reappeared.

On the Liao side of the lines, the prince consort and the general Li Jinwu (1,4) were waiting for a signal to commence their attack. But they waited, and waited, and waited, and still no word came. They didn't even see any movement on the other side once Yanshou rode into the enemy formation. After a while, Song Jiang rode out and shouted, "What are you waiting for? Surrender now! I have already captured Yanshou!"

As he spoke, a group of armed guards hustled Yanshou out to the front lines to show that he wasn't lying. Li Jinwu now galloped out to try to rescue Yanshou, but he was met by Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. As the two approached each other with weapons raised, the soldiers on both sides let out fierce war cries. But Li Jinwu was intimidated from the start, and when he could bring his spear up in time, Qin Ming's wolf-toothed mace landed on the top of the head, smashing through his helmet and crushing his skull, sending his corpse to the ground.

Seeing this, the Liao prince consort quickly led his forces and turned back. Song Jiang's men swept forward and put them to flight, capturing more than 3,000 war horses and leaving the ground littered with enemy banners and weapons. Resounding victory in hand, Song Jiang now marched on the Liao capital.

The remnants of the defeated Liao vanguard fled back to see Commander Wuyan, telling him that his son had been captured alive in the enemy's formation, the general Li Jinwu was now missing a head, and the prince consort was just missing. Commander Wuyan was shocked.

"My son has been learning formations since his youth and is well-versed in their intricacies," he said. "What formation did that Song Jiang use to capture him?"



The men told him, "It was just a Nine-Unit Octagon, nothing special. Our young general laid out four formations, but those savages recognized all of them. Then they challenged the young general to attack their Nine-Unit Octagon. So he charged in with 1,000 riders, but only half made it in. Then we don't know what happened, but he ended up getting captured alive."

"A Nine-Unit Octagon is not hard to break; they must have changed formations," Commander Wuyan said.

"We were watching from the command platform," the men said. "We didn't see any movement in their lines, and their banners didn't change either. We just saw dark clouds hovering over the formation."

"They must be using black magic," Commander Wuyan said. "Even if I don't go meet them, the enemy will come anyway. If I don't win, I will kill myself! Who dares to be my vanguard and set out first? I will follow with the main army."

Two generals, one with the last name Qiong (2) and one with the last name Kou (4), volunteered. Commander Wuyan gave them 10,000 men and sent them off. Meanwhile, he assembled the 11 star-blest generals and 28 heavenly officers that he bragged about, took his leave of the Liao king, and led 200,000 men toward the front lines.

When word of these troop movements reached Song Jiang, it put him on notice, as this was shaping up to be a huge battle. So he immediately sent out orders for Lu Junyi and his forces to join the main army, as well as troops that had been left to guard a couple of the prefectures that they captured earlier on the campaign. He also ordered all the naval chieftains to come on land and join the fight. Finally, he invited Commissioner Zhao to join them so he can personally supervise the coming battle.

Soon, Commissioner Zhao arrived in Youzhou Prefecture under the protection of the naval chieftains. After he and Song Jiang greeted each other, Commissioner Zhao said, "General, you have worked so

hard. You are truly a pillar of the state. Your name will echo through the ages. When I return to court, I will recommend you strongly to his majesty.”

Song Jiang replied, “I am but a lowly, untalented officer of no significance. It’s all because of his majesty’s blessings and your commanding prowess that I have chanced upon some success. It’s not my doing. Now, my spies have reported that Commander Wuyan of the Liao has mobilized 200,000 troops and is coming at us with everything they’ve got. This battle will determine the ultimate outcome. Please set up a camp 5 miles from here to observe as I and my brothers charge into battle.”

Then, Song Jiang took his leave of the commissioner and set out with his army. They marched to Everclear County within the borders of Youzhou Prefecture and set up camp. Song Jiang then assembled all the chieftains to discuss the coming fight.

“This time, Commander Wuyan is personally leading all the Liao forces; it’s no ordinary fight,” Song Jiang said. “Life or death, victory or defeat, it will come down to this battle. Brothers, we must push forward with all we have. Harbor no second thoughts. If we can achieve some small success, when it’s reported to the court, his majesty will reward us, and we shall share in the spoils.”

Everyone rose and declared as one, “Who would dare to disobey your command, brother!”

Just then, an envoy from the Liao arrived with a message from the vanguard, challenging Song Jiang to battle the next day. Song Jiang said fine, signed the letter, and treated the envoy to wine and food before sending him back.

It was now the end of autumn and the onset of winter. All the men and horses now donned heavy armor. The next day, Song Jiang’s troops made breakfast at 5 a.m., struck tents at dawn, and marched out. After a mile, they came upon the Liao forces. Amid the sea of black banners, they could see the command flags of the two vanguard generals. As the war drums rolled and the banners parted, one of

the vanguard commanders, General Qiong (2), galloped out, looking quite the impressive warrior as he sat atop his horse with spear in hand.

Song Jiang asked who would go take on General Qiong, and Shi Jin the Nine-Tattooed Dragons promptly rode out. The two had traded blows for 30 bouts when Shi Jin took a big hack at his opponent but came upon empty. Startled, Shi Jin quickly turned and rode back toward his own lines. General Qiong gave chase. Just as he was closing in on Shi Jin, an arrow flew out from Song Jiang's lines and struck him in the face, sending him off his horse. This was the doing of Hua Rong the Archer. Hearing his foe hit the ground, Shi Jin quickly turned around and plunged his saber into General Qiong, finishing him off.

The other Liao vanguard commander, General Kou (4), was incensed, so he galloped out and cursed, "Scoundrels! How dare you kill my brother with a cheap shot?!"

From Song Jiang's lines, the chieftain Sun Li darted out. As the war drums and battle cries raged, the two warriors went at it. Sun Li's golden spear flew this way and that, and within 20 bouts, General Kou had to turn and ride away. He did not dare to ride back into his own lines, for fear that it might disrupt his formation. So he rode along the front line toward the northeast.

Sun Li kept up a hot pursuit. As he saw General Kou riding off into the distance, he pulled out his bow and arrow and let fly a shot toward General Kou's back. For his part, when General Kou heard the twang of the bowstring, he leaned to one side, and just as the arrow reached him, he raised one hand and grabbed it out of the air, an impressive feat that drew silent raves from Sun Li himself.

General Kou scoffed, "So that knave wants to play at bow and arrow, huh?" He now gripped the arrow between his teeth, latched his spear, took out his own bow, nocked that same arrow onto it, turned and let fly a shot toward Sun Li's chest. Sun Li saw it coming the whole way and was ducking this way and that in his saddle. When the arrow reached him, he leaned straight back on his saddle, letting the arrow fly right over him.

As he was doing that, though, he couldn't rein in his horse, and it just kept galloping toward General Kou. As it got closer, General Kou saw Sun Li lying backward on his horse and thought his arrow had found its mark. But in actuality, Sun Li was playing possum and using his strong thighs to keep himself on top of his horse. As the two got closer, Sun Li suddenly sprang up and let out a mighty roar. General Kou was startled, but quickly said, "You may dodge my arrow, but you can't dodge my spear!"

As he spoke, he thrust his spear toward Sun Li's chest. Instead of deflecting the blow or trying to dodge it, Sun Li puffed up his chest. The tip of the spear clanged off his armor and slid off to the side. In that same moment, he grabbed his opponent with one hand and with the other pulled out his short steel staff and brought it down in a crushing blow. As General Kou's body hit the ground minus half of his head, Sun Li rode back to his own lines.

Song Jiang now directed his army forward, and they routed the Liao forces, sending them scurrying in every direction for their lives. Just as Song Jiang and company were giving chase, he suddenly heard a string of cannon shots in the distance up ahead. So he ordered his naval chieftains to lead a unit and guard the mouth of the river while sending four chieftains to the top of a mountain to see what's coming down the road. What they saw was a giant tide of enemy forces, sweeping toward them.

To see how Song Jiang will grapple with this immense enemy, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Commander Wuyan finally gets to go toe to toe against the heroes of Liangshan. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!