

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 119.

Last time, Song Jiang and company were closing in on the Liao capital. The Liao sent its last best shot, a huge army of 200,000 led by Commander Wuyan (4,2), to stop them. Song Jiang's forces made short work of the enemy's vanguard, but just as they were giving chase, they saw the main Liao army sweeping toward them, so Song Jiang quickly ordered his forces to fall back to their camp at Everclear County. Once they settled in, Song Jiang met with Lu Junyi, Wu Yong the strategist, and Gongsun Sheng the Daoist priest.

"Even though we beat them today and killed two of their vanguard generals, I could see from a high vantage point that the Liao army coming at us was immense," Song Jiang said. "That's their main army. We will no doubt face them in battle tomorrow. I worry we will be outnumbered. What should we do?"

Wu Yong said, "Since ancient times, those who are skilled at warcraft can overcome a numerically superior foe. There's no need to worry. Order our troops to be on guard and prepare our defenses, weapons, and war equipment and await the enemy. We will still just line up in the Nine-Unit Octagon formation. If the enemy dares to attack it, we will do as we did before. Even if they have a million men, they would not dare to attack."

So the next day, they again made breakfast at 5 a.m., struck their tents at dawn, and headed to the border of Changping (1,2) County. There, they lined up in their formation, anchored by their top chieftains. In the back followed the infantry, led by Lu Junyi, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, and Wu Song the Pilgrim. Now, all these seasoned warriors rubbed their fists and prepared for the carnage to come.

A short while later, they saw the Liao army coming in the distance. The novel goes into pages of description about the immensity and prowess of this army, but suffice it to say, it was a mighty host, led by Commander Wuyan, with the Liao king and his high ministers all present and looking on. The Liao

forces were deployed in an egg-shaped celestial formation, anchored firmly like an upside down basin, with flags in the corners, weapons on eight sides, locked in shifting rings.

Song Jiang ordered his men to hold the enemy at bay with archers, while he and the strategists Wu Yong and Zhu Wu climbed a tall ladder to size up the enemy's formation. Song Jiang was stunned by how impressive the enemy looked. Wu Yong took a look and also did not recognize the formation. But Zhu Wu did, and he told Song Jiang, "This is called the Zodiac Formation."

"How do we attack it?" Song Jiang asked.

"This formation has endless variations," Zhu Wu said. "We cannot attack it easily."

"But if we can't break their formation, how can we force them to retreat?" Song Jiang said.

Wu Yong now also advised caution, saying, "How can we attack when we don't know the ins and outs of their formation yet?"

Just as they were discussing, on the other side, Commander Wuyan ordered four generals from one section of his formation to ride out and charge the enemy lines. On his command, seven units from the left side of his formation sprang into action. Their banners parted and closed repeatedly while war drums rolled. The lines of troops appeared to be spinning east to north, north to west, and west to south.

Seeing this, Zhu Wu said, "This is the Celestial Platter turning to the left. The enemy must be attacking."

Before he finished talking, five cannon blasts rang out from the enemy lines, and a swarm of Liao troops swept toward them, with the unstoppable momentum of a falling mountain. Song Jiang's forces were caught off guard and quickly fell back. Their main army tried to hold the line, but the Liao forces now caught them in a pincer attack, sending them away in defeat. Song Jiang's army quickly fell back to their own camp, and the Liao forces called it a day.

Once he regrouped his forces, Song Jiang tallied up the damage. Countless soldiers were wounded, along with four second-tier chieftains. Song Jiang sent them all to the rear camp to have An Daoquan the miracle healer tend to their injuries. He then instructed his men to lay down brambles and other defensive barricades and keep a tight watch on the camp entrance.

Troubled by the defeat, Song Jiang huddled with Lu Junyi and asked him, "What should we do after today's setback? If we don't go out to fight again, the enemy will no doubt come attack us."

Lu Junyi said, "Let's have two columns hit the units defending their flanks, while another two attack the seven enemy detachments in the north. Then we will send our infantry crashing through the middle and see what the enemy has inside their formation."

Song Jiang agreed, and the next morning they deployed their troops as Lu Junyi had suggested. They struck their tents and headed back toward the front lines. In the distance, they saw the enemy, and the enemy spotted them as well.

Song Jiang now ordered Guan Sheng the Saber to head up the left flank, while Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs led the right flank to pin down the enemy flanks, while the main army continued to advance. He then ordered Hua Rong the Archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Dong Ping the General of Double Spears, and Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast to lead a unit on the left, while Lin Chong the Panther Head, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, Suo Chao the Impatient Vanguard, and Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard led a unit on the right. These two columns were to attack the seven black-bannered enemy units in the north.

It didn't take long for those units to dislodge the enemy, as the seven Liao units in the north soon fell into disarray. Song Jiang now sent in 500 shield bearers, led by Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and his usual posse of Fan Rui the Demon King of Chaos and the shield-bearing chieftains Xiang Chong and Li Gun. They were followed by a gaggle of infantry chieftains, led by the likes of Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk,

Wu Song the Pilgrim, Yang Xiong the Sick Guan Suo, Shi Xiu the Daredevil, and the hunter brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao.

This infantry assault team dashed into the Liao formation, but they were immediately enveloped by cannon blasts on every side and besieged by three armies. Once again, Song Jiang's forces could not hold their ground and they turned and fled. The rear column could not withstand the enemy's charge either, and soon everybody was running back to camp again.

This time, the damage was even more extensive, as they suffered more than 50 percent casualty. Plus, two more low-level chieftains suffered serious injuries. AND Li Kui the Black Whirlwind was missing. Turns out he had charged too deep into the enemy lines and were ensnared by hooks, getting himself captured alive. Song Jiang sent the newly injured chieftains to An Daoquan for treatment and placed the injured horses in the care of vet Huangfu (2,3) Duan (1). He then huddled with his strategists.

"We lost another battle today and lost Li Kui, too. What should we do?" he asked.

Wu Yong said, "That young enemy officer we captured a couple days ago is Commander Wuyan's son. We can trade him for Li Kui."

"But if we trade him in now, how would we save officers who are captured in the future?" Song Jiang asked.

"Brother, you are so silly," Wu Yong said. "Just worry about the immediate problem."

Just then, word came that a Liao officer had arrived, seeking an audience. Song Jiang summoned him, and the Liao officer said, "My commander sent me to tell you that we captured one of your chieftains today. We have not harmed him and instead have treated him to wine and meat. My commander wants to release him back to you in exchange for his son. If you are willing to trade, we will send your chieftain back right away."

"In that case, I will bring the commander's son to the front line tomorrow," Song Jiang said. "We will make the trade then."

Once the Liao officer left, Song Jiang said to Wu Yong, “We don’t have any way to break their formation, so how about we use the occasion of the prisoner’s exchange to declare a cease-fire?”

“Yes, let the army rest for now,” Wu Yong agreed. “Once we come up with a good plan, we can come back and fight again.”

So the next morning, they fetched Commander Wuyan’s son and dispatched a messenger to the Liao camp.

In the Liao camp, Commander Wuyan received Song Jiang’s envoy, who said, “Our vanguard general Song sends his regards and offers to exchange your son for our chieftain. Right now, the weather is very cold, and the soldiers are suffering. Let’s have a cease-fire and resume in the spring, so that our forces do not suffer from the cold. Please issue your command.”

But Commander Wuyan angrily shouted, “That witless, embarrassing son of mine got himself captured by you all. How can he bear to face me again even if he lives?! No need to exchange prisoners! Since you’ve captured him, you can just execute him for me! The only way for the fighting to stop is if Song Jiang came and surrendered, and I will spare his life. If he refuses, then when my great army sweeps in, not a blade of grass shall be spared. Now scam!”

The chastened envoy rushed back to tell Song Jiang what Commander Wuyan had said. Song Jiang was greatly alarmed and worried about Li Kui, so he quickly led his army to the front line, with Commander Wuyan’s son in tow. He shouted toward the opposing lines, “Release my man, and I will return your son. It’s fine if you reject the cease-fire; we can keep fighting.”

Soon, a horse emerged from the Liao lines, with Li Kui seated atop it. Song Jiang’s men did likewise with Commander Wuyan’s son. Once the two prisoners returned to their respective lines, the two sides fell back as agreed.

Once he was back in camp, Song Jiang assembled his officers and asked, "The enemy is strong, and we haven't come up with a way to defeat them. It's putting me on pins and needles, and the days seem like years. What should we do?"

Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs now said, "Tomorrow, we can divide our forces into 10 units. Two units will hold our lines, while the other eight will charge as one and settle this."

"Ok, then I will rely completely on your united heart and strength," Song Jiang said.

Wu Yong, however, said, "We have tried to attack them twice without success. Why don't we just stay on the defensive and wait for them to come to us?"

"We can't just keep waiting," Song Jiang said. "As long as all our brothers fight as one, there's no way we can keep losing."

So the next morning, they set out once again, this time in 10 columns. Two columns established a back-up position to hold the lines, while the other eight units charged into the enemy's formation with waving banners and roaring battle cries. But as soon as they entered the formation, they heard thundering cannons inside, and the formation's 28 gates all started to shift, morphing into a Long Serpent formation and closing in on them. Song Jiang's forces were once again unable to cope, and they once again fled in defeat, leaving their banners, weapons, and drums behind as they ran back to camp. Once again, they suffered heavy casualties. After this latest setback, Song Jiang ordered his men to just beef up their defenses and prepared to bunker down for the winter instead of going out to fight.

While Song Jiang was licking his wounds on the front lines, Commissioner Zhao, the supervisor of the campaign, sent multiple letters to the capital, asking the court to send winter clothes for the troops. So the court dispatched a drill instructor of the imperial guard named Wang (2) Wenbin (2,1) to escort the shipment. This guy was well-versed in both civil and military matters and was smart and brave. He was commanded to lead about 10,000 men, along with the civilian cart drivers, to escort 500,000 sets of

winter clothes to the front. They headed out with about 200 carts, each bearing a yellow flag that said, "Clothes from His Majesty".

After traveling for a number of days, they arrived at the front and went to see Commissioner Zhao, who was delighted to see Wang Wenbin (2,1).

"General, you have come at just the right time," Commissioner Zhao said. "Vanguard General Song has recently been defeated time and again by the enemy's Commander Wuyan and his Zodiac formation. A number of his chieftains have also been injured and are being treated here. General Song is camped out at Everclear County and does not dare to engage the enemy. It's been a great concern."

Wang Wenbin said, "That's why the court sent me and my troops here, so as to ensure a quick victory. It would be hard for me to report back to the court, what with this string of defeats. I may be untalented, but I have been studying military texts since my youth and know a thing or two about battle formations. Let me go to the front line, use a little scheme, and engage the enemy in a battle to help alleviate General Song's worries. Will your lordship consent to it?"

Commissioner Zhao was delighted and treated Wang Wenbin to wine and rewarded his convoy drivers. He then instructed Wang Wenbin to bring the winter clothes to Song Jiang's army.

When Song Jiang got word that Wang Wenbin had arrived with 500,000 sets of winter clothes for his men, he quickly welcomed him in and threw him a banquet. After a few cups, Song Jiang recounted how he had been unsuccessful against the enemy's Zodiac formation and asked Wang Wenbin for advice.

"That Zodiac formation is nothing special," Wang Wenbin said. "I am untalented, but I can accompany you to the front lines to have a look and offer some ideas."

Song Jiang was delighted. He instructed that the winter clothes be distributed to the men. Once they had all put on their new clothes, everyone kowtowed toward the South to show their gratitude to the

emperor, chanting, "Long live his majesty!" They then threw a feast to welcome Wang Wenbin and reward the troops.

The next day, Wang Wenbin donned his armor and accompanied Song Jiang out to the front lines. When the Liao forces saw Song Jiang's army, they reported the news to their commander, and soon, six enemy units had marched out of their formation to great fanfare. Song Jiang divided his forces to counter, and managed to fend off this initial attack. Meanwhile, Wang Wenbin climbed up a tall ladder, took a look at the formation, came back down and said to Song Jiang, "That formation is just commonplace; there's nothing special about it."

Hmm, nothing special eh? Does this guy know something that Song Jiang and his strategists didn't? Well, not really. See, Wang Wenbin didn't really understand the formation, but he also didn't want to lose face by admitting that, so he was gonna fake it till he made it. He now ordered the front column to beat the war drums, which drew a similar response from the enemy.

Song Jiang now shouted from his saddle, "We don't want any dogs or wretches! Have you any real men who will come out and fight?!"

Now, that's a lot of trash talk coming from a guy who's been on the losing end of the last three battles. Before he finished delivering his challenge, a Liao general galloped out from the fourth gate in the black-banner unit of the formation. His hair hung loose and was bound at the forehead by a strip of yellow silk. He wore dark, gleaming armor of metal hoops over a sleeveless black robe. He sat atop a raven-black horse and wielded a three-pointed saber.

Seeing the challenge being answered, Wang Wenbin thought to himself, "If I don't show off my skills now, then when?" So he raised his spear and rode out, and the two warriors started trading blows without exchanging a word. After 20 bouts, the Liao general turned and rode away. Wang Wenbin quickly gave chase. But he did not recognize that this was just a ploy by his foe. As Wang Wenbin drew

near, the Liao general suddenly turned and took a mighty swing with his saber, cutting Wang Wenbin in two and sending his corpse to the ground. I guess a 12th-century battlefield really wasn't the kind of place to try to fake it till you make it.

Song Jiang was startled to see Wang Wenbin bite the dust. Before he could react, the Liao forces came sweeping toward his troops again, and once again, the Song forces scurried back to camp in defeat, and now, many on the Song side were feeling even more intimidated, having seen this supposedly mighty warrior from the imperial guard get cut down.

Back in camp, Song Jiang sent word of the debacle to Commissioner Zhao, whose mood turned from relief back to worry, and he sent word along to the court about Wang Wenbin's fate.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang brooded in camp, beating his head against a rock, trying to figure out how to defeat the enemy. He was so troubled that he skipped meals, did not sleep well, and couldn't even sit still. It was now the height of winter, and the weather was getting extremely cold. One night, Song Jiang closed the door to his tent and sat by the candle light, lost in thought. As the night dragged on, he started feeling tired and fell asleep in his clothes.

Suddenly, a violent gale kicked up in his tent, with its cold air seeping into his bones. Song Jiang sat up startled, and saw a young female acolyte dressed in green, bowing to him.

"Where did you come from?" he asked in surprise.

"I have come on her ladyship's command to invite you; please come with me," she answered.

Oh, this is one of those trippy visions again, I see. Alright, lead the way. Song Jiang now followed the acolyte out of the tent. He looked up and saw that the upper and lower reaches of the heavens were suffused by a glowing interplay of gold and jade. There was a fragrant breeze and a soft mist, and the weather felt as though it was spring.

They walked for less than a mile before they came upon a large forest with lush pines, cypress, and purple osmanthus. A stone path wound through lush groves of bamboos and swaying willows. They crossed over a stone bridge and passed through a red door. Inside was a courtyard lined with beautifully painted buildings sporting decorated rafters and beams, red gold-studded doors, jade-tiled roofs, heavy eaves, tortoise-backed window sills, and curtains so delicate that they resembled the tendrils on prawns.

The acolyte led Song Jiang east down a corridor to a room on the left. She opened the vermilion door and asked him to sit down for a bit. She then went away and came back momentarily, saying, "Our queen invites the star lord to join her."

Song Jiang had barely just sat down, but now he got up again, and two beautifully dressed fairy maids came in and greeted him. He averted his gaze and did not dare to look them in the eye, but they told him, "General, there is no need to be modest. Our queen is changing her clothes and will be out momentarily. She wants to discuss important affairs of state with you."

So Song Jiang followed them out, and as they headed to a large hall, he heard the sound of golden bells and chimes ringing. The two fairy maids led him into the hall and up the steps to a pearl curtain. Song Jiang could hear the tinkling of little jade chimes in the breeze from beyond the curtain. The fairy maids now invited him in, and he kneeled in front of an incense table.

When he looked up, he saw the Mystic Queen seated atop a couch opposite him that was carved with nine dragons, surrounded by fresh clouds and purple mist. She wore a crown of nine dragons and flying phoenixes, a gossamer blouse of pale brown, studded with gems in dragon and phoenix design, and a sun-and-moon skirt. Her feet were shod in pearl-studded cloud pattern slippers, and she held a rod of flawless white jade. Around her were about 30 fairy maids.

"It has been several years since I bestowed upon you the divine scrolls," the Mystic Queen said to Song Jiang. "You have kept them well and followed their words faithfully. Now, the Song emperor has commanded you to defeat the Liao. How goes the campaign?"

Song Jiang kowtowed and replied, "Ever since I received the divine scrolls from you, I have kept them secret. Now, I have been sent by his majesty to defeat the Liao, but I have been defeated time and again by Commander Wuyan's Zodiac Formation. Your servant is at his wit's end and facing a precarious situation."

The Mystic Queen asked, "Do you know the Zodiac Formation?"

"I am a mortal fool and do not understand," Song Jiang said. "I hope you will enlighten me."

"The Zodiac formation is arranged like the solar system," the Mystic Queen explained. "You will never break it by brute force. You have to follow the laws of harmony and antagonism."

And at this point the Mystic Queen gets knee deep into Daoist mysticism, but the long and short is that she laid out for Song Jiang exactly how he should attack the formation. When she was done explaining, she told him, "Keep my words secret. Defend the country and bring peace to the people, and do not harbor any thoughts of turning back. There is a limit to how much celestials and mortals can interact. We will part forever at this point. When you come to the heavenly palaces, we shall meet again. Return now at once; do not linger here."

At that, she told her acolyte to offer Song Jiang tea. After he finished the tea, she told the acolyte to see him back to his camp. Song Jiang bowed again to thank the Mystic Queen and then followed the acolyte out of the hall and headed west. They went back through the red door and retraced their steps back to the stone bridge. The acolyte suddenly pointed and said, "The enemy is right over there; you will defeat them."

Song Jiang turned and looked, and in that instant, the acolyte gave him a big push, and he startled awake in his tent, hearing the sound of the drums that signaled it was now 3 a.m.

Song Jiang now invited the strategist Wu Yong to join him in his tent. When Wu Yong arrived, Song Jiang asked him, "Do you have an idea for defeating the Zodiac formation yet?"

“Not yet,” Wu Yong replied.

“The Mystic Queen has given me secret instructions for how to do it,” Song Jiang said. “I have a plan that I would like to discuss with you. Then we should assemble the men and deploy them.”

After they huddled, Song Jiang sent word of the plan to Commissioner Zhao. Meanwhile, he ordered his men to build 24 gun carriages made from planks and iron sheets. Each one had oil-soaked firewood underneath, and a cannon mounted on top. His men worked through the night and finished the job.

Then, it was time to assemble the officers and hand out assignments. And here’s how Song Jiang deployed his men:

Dong Ping the General of Double Spears would lead a unit dressed in yellow to attack the center of the portion of the enemy formation that corresponded with the planet Mercury, while seven other chieftains would attack the seven black-bannered cavalry troops to the left and right.

Lin Chong the Panther Head would lead a unit dressed in white and gold to attack the heart of the Jupiter portion, while seven other chieftains would attack the green-bannered enemy units to the left and right.

Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt would lead a unit dressed in red and attack Venus, with another seven chieftains attacking the flanks in that part of the formation.

Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs would lead a unit in black and attack Mars, with seven chieftains attacking the flanks.

Guan Sheng the Great Saber would lead a unit in green and attack Saturn, flanked by seven other chieftains.

Another unit led by seven infantry chieftains, headed up by Lu Zhishen and Wu Song, would strike at the sun division in the formation, while another seven chieftains, led by the three female warriors, would attack the moon division.

A strike force led by six chieftains, including Lu Junyi, would charge at the center of the formation to capture the Liao king. Another five chieftains were deployed to provide cover for the gun carriages to move up to the middle. The naval chieftains, meanwhile, would come to the front line and provide backup.

Everyone now snapped to and tended to their own preparations. To see how the coming battle will go, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, the Liao king exploits one of the Song's biggest weaknesses. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.