

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 121.

Last time, Song Jiang and company were on the brink of wiping out the Liao kingdom, in fictional prose if not in actual history. But the Liao decided to take a page out of the Middle Kingdom's book and spread some bribes around the Song capital. Next thing you know, the Song emperor had been convinced by his corrupt officials to accept the Liao's offer of truce, return all the captured territories and prisoners to the Liao, and recall the Song army. Disappointed at not being allowed to finish the job but still more or less satisfied that the point had been made, Song Jiang and company packed up and prepared to return to the capital.

As they were getting ready to head out, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk went to see Song Jiang and said, "When I killed Butcher Zheng, I fled and a rich man sponsored me to become a monk on nearby Wutai (3,2) Mountain, under the tutelage of the abbot Zhizhen (4,1). But twice I got drunk and caused a ruckus at the monastery, so my master sent me to the Xiangguo (4,2) Monastery in the capital. Then, because I had to save Lin Chong from Marshal Gao's wicked scheme, I became an outlaw. Then I met you and followed you for a long time. I've been thinking about my master, whom I have not seen since my departure from his monastery. I often remember him telling me that despite my vicious nature, I will achieve sainthood one day. Now that the land is at peace, I would like to take a few days' leave and go see my master at Wutai Mountain. I want to donate all the riches I have been given as a reward to the monastery and ask my master about my future. Brother, you can go on ahead with the army; I will catch up with you."

As he listened, Song Jiang remained silent. Then, he said, "Why didn't you tell me there was a living Buddha nearby? I will go with you to pay my respects and ask about my future as well."

So Song Jiang now discussed the matter with his officers, and all the chieftains wanted to tag along, all except for Gongsun Sheng since he belonged to a different religion. So Song Jiang left four low-level

chieftains with Lu Junyi to command the army, while he, all the rest of the chieftains, and 1,000 men set out toward Wutai Mountain with fragrant incense and loads of gold and silver in tow.

So as it turns out, this Abbot Zhizhen on Wutai Mountain was a famous monk at the time and was regarded as a living Buddha who could see the future. No wonder everyone wanted to go see him. In fact, remember that when Lu Zhishen joined his monastery, Abbott Zhizhen had predicted that he was destined for karmic greatness and thus should be taken in.

When Song Jiang and company arrived at Wutai Mountain, they left their soldiers camped out at the foot of the mountain and sent someone to deliver a message to the monastery. Meanwhile, Song Jiang and his chieftains changed into their official brocade battle robes and went up the mountain on foot. As they approached the monastery gates, they could hear the sound of bells and drums echoing from inside, and all the monks came out to welcome them, offering their respects to Song Jiang and Lu Zhishen.

Now, quite a number of the monks present were at the monastery when Lu Zhishen was there, and they were astonished and impressed to see him now, accompanied by 100-some officers, including the vanguard general of the newly victorious Song army. For his part, I'm just imagining Lu Zhishen acting as tour guide the whole way in, pointing out that he destroyed the idols by this gate, beat up a bunch of monks in that sutra hall, and took a dump on the ground behind that shed.

Anyway, the monks told Song Jiang that the abbot was meditating and thus could not come out to welcome him. They then invited the visitors to the guest parlor for tea. Momentarily, an attendant came in and said that the abbot had just finished meditating and was waiting for them in his quarters. So Song Jiang and his 100-some brothers went to the abbot's quarters, where they exchanged greetings.

Song Jiang sized up the abbot and saw that he was a man in his 60s with white hair and eyebrows and the fine bone features of one who had long resided in remote mountains. Once everyone entered

the abbot's quarters, Song Jiang asked the abbot to take his seat, and then Song Jiang and his brothers lit incense and bowed to pay their respects.

The abbot now looked over at Lu Zhishen and said, "My pupil, you've been gone for many years, and you're still killing and burning."

To this, Lu Zhishen had no answer, and he just remained silent. Song Jiang, though, stepped forward and said to the abbot, "I have long heard of your pure virtue, but was never fortunate enough to have the chance to gaze upon your noble visage. Today, I happened to be in the area because I was sent by his majesty to defeat the Liao, and so I am able to come offer my homage to a great prelate. It is the honor of a lifetime. Zhishen is my brother. Even though he has killed and burned, he has never harmed good people, and his heart has always been pure. He was the one who led us here to see you."

The abbot replied, "We often have high-ranking prelates visit our monastery, and they mention the current affairs of the outside world. I have long heard that you, general, deliver justice on behalf of heaven and are loyal and honorable at heart. I also know that your brothers value honor above all else. So my pupil Zhishen can do no wrong in following you."

Song Jiang thanked the abbot for that high praise. Now, Lu Zhishen took out a bundle of gold, silver, and silks and presented it to his master. The abbot asked, "Where did this stuff come from? I will never accept anything obtained via dishonorable means."

"I saved all this from the many rewards that I have received," Lu Zhishen said. "I have no use for them, so I want to offer them to you for communal use in the monastery."

"We would have a hard time spending all this," the abbot said. "So let me use this money to buy a set of sutras, so as to help you expiate your sins and attain nirvana."

Lu Zhishen thanked the abbot. Now, Song Jiang took out his own bundle of swag and presented it to the abbot, but the abbot steadfastly refused. But Song Jiang said, "If you will not accept it, then you can use it to buy a vegetarian feast as a gift to all the monks."

After the back-and-forth over the giving and receiving of swag, Song Jiang and company spent the night at the monastery, and the abbot treated them to a vegetarian meal. The next day, after another vegetarian feast, the monks rang their bells and beat their drums in the temple. Abbot Zhizhen assembled members of the order, ascended his dais, and delivered a sermon. All the monks showed up dressed in their cassocks and sat down in the temple. Song Jiang, Lu Zhishen, and the other chieftains stood to the side and watched.

A stone chime sounded, and two red gauze lanterns lit the way for the abbot as he took his seat on the dais. Holding a stick of burning incense, he said, "With this incense, we pray for longevity for his majesty, his empress, and his prince. May the imperial family flourish, and the officials rise constantly in rank. May the realm be peaceful and all the people delight in their labors."

He then picked up a second stick of incense and declared, "May our patrons be at ease in body and mind, live for a thousand turns of the sun, and be remembered for all posterity."

He then picked up a third stick of incense and said, "May the country be safe and the people prosperous. May the age be one of serenity. May the five grains be bountiful, may the three religions be glorious, may the four corners of the realm be peaceful, and may all wishes come true."

After the prayers, the abbot sat down, while all the other monks rose. Song Jiang now stepped forward with incense in hand and bowed. He then pressed his palms together, approached the abbot, and said, "I would like to ask you a question."

"What is it?" the abbot asked.

"This is my question: One's life on earth is limited, yet suffering is without end. Man's body is meager, yet his greatest concern is life and death. I would like to ask about my fate."

In response, the abbot offered up this cryptic answer: "By the six senses bound, by the four elements restricted, you have taken a few tumbles in the flames of battle. Alas, all living things afloat in this world futilely howl in mire and sand."

Umm ... Song Jiang was probably hoping for something a little more specific. I mean, even a simple "You will face challenges today" might be more helpful. Nonetheless, the living Buddha had spoken, and Song Jiang bowed and stood in attendance. The other chieftains now stepped forward and bowed with incense in hand, declaring, "We wish only to live and die together, in this life and in every life."

After that, all the monks left, and the visitors were invited to the Hall of Clouds for a meal. After the meal, Song Jiang and Lu Zhishen followed the abbot to his quarters and stayed there chatting until night fell.

As they talked, Song Jiang asked the abbot, "Zhishen and I wanted to stay here with you for a few more days to ask for more guidance, but I am in command of a large army and dare not linger. Yet, I really did not understand the guidance you have given me. Now, we are taking our leave and returning to the capital. May I ask what the future holds for me and my brothers? I hope you will tell me what is in store."

The abbot told his attendant to fetch brush and ink, and on a slip of paper, he wrote the following four lines:

When the shadows of the wild geese pass,

In the east there is no unity.

Cocking an eye he scores his mark,

At Double Woods full prosperity.

He then handed the paper to Song Jiang and said, "Your whole life is here, general. You must preserve it well, and in time, the words will come true."

Song Jiang read the lines over, but still did not understand their meaning. So he asked the abbot again, "I am foolish and do not understand. I beg you to explain clearly. Should I expect good or ill?"

“These are mystic Buddhist words,” the abbot said. “You must think them over on your own. I cannot explain them plainly, lest I leak heaven’s secrets.”

Then, the abbot called Lu Zhishen over and told him, “My pupil, once you leave, we will be parting for good. Nirvana draws near. Let me give you four lines of guidance. Keep them with you always and use them all your life.”

The abbot then wrote:

Take Xia (4) when you encounter him;

Seize La (4) when you meet.

When you hear the tide, round out the circle.

When you see the tide, in silence rest.

Lu Zhishen bowed and received the guidance, read it a few times, and stashed it in his pocket before thanking his master. The abbot reminded him, “My pupil, remember these words and do not forget your original form.”

Then, they turned in for the night. The next morning, Song Jiang and company bid goodbye to the abbot, and then all the monks saw them out.

Song Jiang and company now rushed back to catch up with the main army. They met up with Lu Junyi, Gongsun Sheng and the other guys left behind to mind the shop, and recounted their experience on Wutai Mountain. Song Jiang showed them the lines that the abbot had written about his future, but no one could decipher it. Xiao Rang the Sacred-Handed Scholar then said, “How can common folk like us hope to understand mystic words of religion?” and everyone sighed regretfully.

Song Jiang now ordered the army to resume its journey home. After a few days on the road, they were passing a place called Double Woods Crossing. Song Jiang looked up from his saddle and saw

several lines of geese flying across the sky. But instead of their usual organized formations, these geese seemed to be in disarray, as some flew high, some flew low, and all were squawking in alarm. This sight puzzled Song Jiang, and then heard cheers from in front. He sent someone up ahead to see what was going on, and his men reported back that it was the doing of Yan Qing the Prodigy. Yan Qing was just starting to learn to shoot with a bow and arrow, and he was taking practice shots at the geese. But he was such a natural that every shot hit its target, and within minutes, he had shot down more than a dozen geese, drawing praise from the other officers.

Song Jiang now summoned Yan Qing, who arrived atop a roan desert steed, carrying his bow and arrows, donning a broad-brimmed felt hat, and dressed in a parrot-yellow tunic quilted with flaxen floss. On the back of his saddle were strung up a bunch of dead geese. When he came upon Song Jiang, Yan Qing dismounted and stood to one side.

“Were you shooting geese just now?” Song Jiang asked.

“I was learning how to shoot with bow and arrow,” Yan Qing said. “When I saw the geese flying past, I mindlessly took aim. Who knew every shot would find its mark and so I accidentally shot down a dozen or so.”

“A soldier should learn archery,” Song Jiang said. “And it’s a testament to your skills that your aim is true. But the geese left the Himalayas in autumn and flew south across the Yangzi River with reeds in their beaks to where it’s warm and they can find food. And they don’t return until the next spring. They are most virtuous birds. They travel in flocks of up to 50, and they fly in orderly ranks, with the leader at the head and the inferiors behind. They never leave the flock, and they post sentinels when they rest at night. If a gander loses his goose, or a goose her gander, they never mate again. These birds possess all five attributes: compassion, honor, propriety, intelligence, and faith.

“If a goose dies in flight, all the others will cry in mourning, and none will ever harass a bereaved bird. That is compassion. When a fowl loses its mate, it never pairs again. That is honor. They fly in a

definite order, each automatically assuming its place. That is propriety. They avoid hawks and eagles, silently crossing the passes with reed sticks in their beaks. That is intelligence. They fly south in autumn and north in spring, every year without fail. That is faith.

“How, then, can we bear to harm them? A flock of geese flying by overhead, all helping each other, are like our band of brothers. Yet you have shot down a number of them. That is like losing some of our brothers. How would that make us feel? You must never harm such virtuous creatures again.”

Yan Qing listened in silence, filled with penitence and remorse for harming these perfect Confucian waterfowl. Meanwhile, Song Jiang, feeling emotional after his own speech, composed and recited a poem while riding along. The poem said:

Jagged peaks draped in mist,
Three lines of geese across the sky.
Suddenly in flight a mate is lost —
Cold moon, chill breeze, a mournful cry.

Well, those lines didn't exactly help cheer him up. In fact, after reciting the poem, he felt very depressed. That night, as the army camped at Double Woods Crossing, he sat in his tent, again lamenting the death of such noble creatures. As he brooded, he called for brush and paper, and composed another piece, which said:

Far from the startled, scattered flock,
In the vast clear firmament
A wild goose flies.
A lone shadow seeking a sheltering pond,
Finding naught but dry grass, and wastes,
Open water, endless skies.

No poet,
I can only set down these few thoughts.
Dusk in an empty ravine,
Campfire smoke in an ancient fort,
I'm more dejected than I can say!
Though we've cleared the reeds,
We've not place to spend the night.
When, oh when, will we see once more
The gate to our homeland!
Drearly I sob and sigh,
Longing to depart this hateful river.
Would that spring come soon again,
With swallows nesting in the beams.

After he was done, he handed his work to Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng. The words were dripping with sadness and loneliness, and Song Jiang remained in his melancholy state. That night, they drank deep into the night until they were all inebriated. The next morning, they climbed back into the saddle and resumed their journey south. Along the way, the desolate winter landscape did not help Song Jiang's mood. After some more days, they finally approached the capital. They pitched camp at Chen Bridge Station, where, of course, Song Jiang had executed one of his own men for killing a sleazy government official at the beginning of the campaign. And now they were back, and they awaited the emperor's summon.

Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao went on ahead into the capital with the main army. They reported to the emperor how Song Jiang and company had rendered tremendous service on the

campaign and that they were now back outside the capital. The emperor praised Song Jiang and his men nonstop upon hearing that news, and decreed that Song Jiang and company shall enter the city in full armor for an audience with him.

Upon receiving this message, the 108 chieftains donned their battle robes and armor, all except for Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, Lu Zhishen, and Wu Song, the four guys who got religious exemptions. This impressive party entered through the east gate and went to the palace to see the emperor. They kowtowed and hailed his majesty, and he was delighted to see them dressed in such military splendor.

“I have heard much of your hardship on the expedition and your dedication in the border region,” the emperor said. “I was also greatly concerned about the casualties that you suffered.”

Song Jiang kowtowed again and said, “Thanks to your heavenly blessing, the borderlands are at peace. Even though some among our ranks were injured, they are all ok. Now the desert barbarians have surrendered, and it is all thanks to your majesty’s benevolent teaching.”

As Song Jiang bowed again at the end of his remarks, the emperor now summoned officials from the Council of Military Affairs and asked them what ranks should be bestowed upon Song Jiang and company for their service. But Premiere Cai Jing and Chancellor Tong Guan spoke up.

“Right now the borders are not yet pacified, so it is not suitable to give promotions,” they said. “You should bestow upon Song Jiang the honorary title of Defender of Righteousness, let him bear imperial arms, and put him in charge of guarding the palace. Give Lu Junyi the title of Military Teacher and allow him to bear imperial weapons as well. And make him the head of military training. Wu Yong and the other 34 top-tier officers can be made senior generals, while the 72 second-level officers can be junior generals. You can also distribute money among the soldiers.”

So what this meant, essentially, was that only Song Jiang and Lu Junyi received actual official positions that meant anything, and they weren’t exactly high-level posts at the imperial court. Everyone else just got an empty military title, a bit of cash, and a pat on the back. Alas the emperor went along

with those suggestions. Song Jiang and company bowed to offer their thanks, and the emperor threw them a lavish feast. At the end of the feast, the emperor bestowed upon Song Jiang a brocade robe, a set of golden armor, and a fine horse. All the chieftains also received rewards from the treasury. They all kowtowed to show their gratitude and then exited the palace, left the city through the west gate, and returned to their camp to await further orders from the court.

The next morning, the priest Gongsun Sheng went to the command tent, greeted everyone, and said to Song Jiang, "Before, my master Priest Luo had instructed me that once I see you back to the capital, I should return to the mountain sanctuary to follow the Way. He had also mentioned that to you. Now that you have returned triumphant and become famous, I cannot linger. I will say farewell to you and everyone, and return to my master immediately to follow the Way and to take care of my mother for the rest of her days."

Song Jiang knew that he had made Gongsun Sheng and Priest Luo a promise on this point before, so he did not dare to go back on his word. Nonetheless, tears flowed from his eyes as he said, "Our days together were like flowers in bloom. Our parting is like falling petals. Even though I dare not go back on my promise, it still breaks my heart to see you go."

Gongsun Sheng consoled him. "If I had abandoned you midway, then I would be lacking love and respect. But now, you have succeeded and established a name for yourself. This is no place for a poor Daoist. Please give your consent."

Song Jiang tried some more to convince him to change his mind, but Gongsun Sheng remained steadfast. So Song Jiang had no choice but to hold a going-away banquet for him. As they raised their cups to him, everyone let out sighs of lament and shed tears. Everyone tried to give Gongsun Sheng some parting gifts, but he declined them all. Even so, his brothers shoved it all into his luggage.

The next morning, they all took their leave of him. Gongsun Sheng put on his hemp sandals, strapped a bundle to his back, bowed to everyone to say goodbye, and walked off toward the north. For days after his departure, Song Jiang could not stop thinking about him, and his tears fell like rain, dampening his mood.

Soon, the new year was fast approaching, and all the court officials prepared to celebrate. But Premier Cai was afraid that if Song Jiang and all his chieftains were present at the court festivities, the emperor would see them, remember that “Oh yeah these guys beat down a foreign kingdom for me” and would want to give them important roles. So he convinced the emperor to issue a decree, limiting the invitation to only Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, the two guys who had actual court appointments. All the other chieftains, on account of not having any official rank, were “excused” from attending so that they do not “alarm his majesty.”

On New Year’s Day, all the court officials, including Song Jiang and Lu Junyi, donned their formal dress and came to offer their congratulations to the emperor. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were in the waiting room for the morning imperial audience, and they kowtowed with the rest of the officials. The emperor received everyone’s congratulations from his throne, which Song Jiang and Lu Junyi could barely see from way way in the back. They couldn’t even set foot in the hall; they just looked upon all the ornaments and fine trappings of the ministers who came and went as they toasted the emperor.

This went on until noon, and only then were those outside the hall given some imperial wine as a token of appreciation from the emperor. Then, the officials broke up, the emperor left, and the festivities were over. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi left the palace, removed their formal dress, got back on their horses, and rode back to camp with sour looks on their faces. They were greeted by their brothers, who saw their gloomy expression and came to offer their holiday wishes to cheer them up. Yet, even as more than 100 chieftains lined up and paid their respects, Song Jiang just kept looking down without saying a word.

“Brother, why are you so gloomy after today’s festivities at court?” the strategist Wu Yong asked.

“We endured so much hardship in defeating the Liao,” Song Jiang sighed, “and yet because of my rotten lot in life, all my brothers’ service has gone unrecognized, and I myself only landed a petty official post. That is why I am gloomy.”

“Well, since you know your time has not yet come, why be downcast about it?” Wu Yong consoled him. “All things are preordained. There is no need to trouble yourself.”

Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, however, offered a different take. “Brother, you still haven’t figured it out! Back when we were on Liangshan, we didn’t have to put up with anybody’s BS. But you kept talking about amnesty, amnesty. Well now that we have gotten amnesty, and it has brought you nothing but headaches. All our brothers are here; let’s go back to Liangshan! Won’t that be great?!”

At that, Song Jiang barked, “This dark beast is spouting nonsense again! We are now civil servants, good court officials. Yet you don’t understand, and you’re still a rebel at heart!”

“Brother,” Li Kui retorted, “if you don’t listen to me, there’s plenty more abuse in store for you.”

Everyone laughed and tried to make peace by offering toasts to Song Jiang. They drank until about 9 p.m. before breaking up.

The next day, Song Jiang and about a dozen riders went into the capital to offer holiday wishes to Marshal Su and Commissioner Zhao. As they made their way around the city, they drew a crowd. When word of this got back to Premier Cai, he persuaded the emperor to issue an edict saying that all the officers who went on the campaign must remain camped outside the capital and could not enter the city without being summoned. Violators would be punished according to military regulations. When word of this got back to Song Jiang and his men, he became even more troubled, while his chieftains got even more agitated and began seething with thoughts of rebellion.

To see whether this brewing insurrection will boil over, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang discovers a new mission. So join us next time.

Thanks for listening!