

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 123.

Last time, Song Jiang volunteered to be the vanguard for the Song court's expedition against the rebel Fang La in the South, who had occupied a large stretch of territory around the Yangzi River and declared himself emperor. So Song Jiang and his men headed to Yangzhou prefecture, the Song stronghold on the north bank of the river.

His first challenge was to figure out how to cross the river, since Fang La's Chancellor of Military Affairs, Lü (3) Shinang (1,2), controlled Runzhou (4,1) Prefecture, the key city on the south bank of the river. Song Jiang sent out a couple scouting parties. One of those parties, led by Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind and Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves, went to the ferry crossing at Guazhou (1,1), but could not find a single boat there. So that night, Zhang Shun swam over to Jinshan (1,1), one of two islands in the middle of the river, to see what intel he could gather.

Zhang Shun was hiding on a small boat around midnight when he spotted a suspicious looking boat heading toward him. He wanted to row over to intercept it, but found that his own boat was latched in place by a thick iron chain and also did not have a pole for pushing off. So he had no choice but to take off his clothes, take his dagger in hand, jump back into the river, and swim over to the side of the oncoming boat.

The attention of the two men rowing that boat was firmly affixed on the north shore, so they did not notice Zhang Shun approaching from the south. Zhang Shun suddenly popped up alongside the boat, grabbed the gunwale, and slashed at the two men with his dagger. In the blink of an eye, the two rowers fell into the river, and Zhang Shun leaped into the boat.

Two other men now emerged from the cabin. Before they could even react, Zhang Shun had already cut down one guy and sent him into the water. The other was so scared that he fell backward into the cabin.

“Who are you?! Where are you coming from?! Tell me the truth, and I will spare you!” Zhang Shun barked at him.

“Hero, please hear me,” the man pleaded. “I am a servant in the household of Chen Guan (1), who lives in a village outside Yangzhou Prefecture. My master sent me to Runzhou Prefecture to present some grain to Chancellor Lü (3). The chancellor accepted and sent a captain back with me to ask for 50,000 bushels of grain and 300 boats. That will be my master’s entrance fee for joining Fang La’s forces.”

“What’s that captain’s name? Where is he?” Zhang Shun asked.

“His name was Ye (4) Gui (4), and he’s the one you just cut down.”

“And what’s your name? When did you pay your visit to Chancellor Lü? What gifts are you bringing back?”

“My name is Wu (2) Cheng (2). I crossed the river on the seventh day of the first month this year. Chancellor Lü sent me to Suzhou (1,1) Prefecture to see Fang Mao (4), the third brother of the emperor Fang La. He gave me 300 banners and the official appointment letter for my master, making him the prefect of Yangzhou and a lord. There are 1,000 uniforms and a letter from Chancellor Lü.”

“And how many men and horses does your master have?”

“He has a few thousand men and more than 100 horses. He has two sons, and both are formidable warriors.”

After thoroughly questioning the messenger, Zhang Shun finished him off with one swing of the dagger and sent his body into the water as well. He then rowed the boat back to the ferry point on the north bank. There, he was greeted by Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind, who rushed out when he heard the sound of the oars. Zhang Shun shared what he learned, and Chai Jin was delighted. They fetched the documents, banners, and uniforms from the cabin of the boat and packed them into two loads. Zhang Shun then rowed the boat back over to the foot of Jinshan Island, retrieved his clothes and silver from the other boat, and rowed back over to the ferry point.

By now, the sky was just starting to lighten, and heavy fog still covered the river. Zhang Shun put a hole in the boat and sent it to the bottom of the river to conceal any evidence of the night's events. He then returned to the thatched hut where his group was taking shelter. They gave a few taels of silver to the old woman who let them stay there, and then rushed back to Yangzhou Prefecture with the evidence that they had just seized. They got back just in time for the multi-day welcome banquet that the local officials were throwing for Song Jiang and his soldiers.

After the banquet, Chai Jin and Zhang Shun went to see Song Jiang in the guest quarters and told him, "Chen Guan (1) is allying himself with Fang La. Sooner or later he's going to help the rebels cross the river to attack Yangzhou Prefecture. Thankfully, we ran into his men on the river, handing you this gift."

Song Jiang was delighted and consulted with the strategist Wu Yong, who said, "Since we have this opportunity, capturing Runzhou Prefecture will be as easy as turning over your hand. First, let's apprehend Chen Guan (1), and the rest will be easy. We just need to do this and this and this."

Song Jiang now summoned Yan Qing the Prodigy and told him to disguise himself as the captain that was sent by the rebels. He also told the hunter brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao to disguise themselves as rebel soldiers accompanying the captain. They got directions to the village where Chen Guan resided, and the trio headed that way, with the Xie brothers carrying the two loads of presents from the rebels.

After traveling for about 15 miles, they arrived outside the Chen estate. They saw about 30 workhands, all dressed in neat, identical fashion, lined up at the gate with knives by their side.

Yan Qing now put on his best local accent and greeted the workhands, asking if their master was home.

"Where are you from, traveler?" the workhands asked.

"We are from Runzhou Prefecture. After we crossed the river, we went the wrong way and lost half a day getting turned around before we found our way here."

Hearing this, the workhands led the trio to a guestroom and told them to leave their loads there. Yan Qing then went to the back parlor to pay his respects to Chen Guan. Yan Qing kneeled and introduced himself as the rebel captain Ye (4) Gui (4).

“What are you doing here?” Chen Guan asked him after the greetings.

“Please dismiss the others; only then can I tell you,” Yan Qing said.

“These are all my confidants, so go ahead,” Chen Guan reassured him.

“Your servant’s name is Ye Gui, and I am a captain in the service of Chancellor Lü,” Yan Qing said. “On the seventh day of the first month, we received the secret letter delivered by your man Wu (2) Cheng (2). The chancellor was delighted and sent me to escort Wu Cheng to Suzhou (1,1) Prefecture to meet the imperial brother and relay your intentions. The imperial brother then informed his majesty and received a decree appointing you as the prefect of Yangzhou. As for your two sons, the chancellor will decide their ranks after he has met you. He was going to send Wu Cheng back, but Wu Cheng got sick and could not travel. The chancellor was afraid the delay would ruin the plan, so he sent me to deliver the appointment letter, along with a letter from him, as well as 300 banners and 1,000 uniforms. On the designated date, he wants you to deliver the grain and ships to the banks of Runzhou prefecture.”

As he spoke, Yan Qing offered up the letters, and Chen Guan was delighted. He immediately set up an incense table and kowtowed to the south to express his gratitude. He then summoned his two sons to come meet the guest. The Xie brothers, meanwhile, took out the uniforms and banners and gave them to Chen Guan’s men.

Chen Guan now asked Yan Qing to sit, but Yan Qing said, “I am but a messenger. How would I dare to sit in front of your lordship?”

But Chen Guan insisted, saying, “You are an emissary sent by my benefactor, and you came with his majesty’s appointment letter. I would never dare to slight you. Please sit.”

After some back-and-forth, Yan Qing relented and sat down at a distance from his host. Chen Guan now called for wine, and he personally offered a cup to Yan Qing, but Yan Qing declined, saying he could not hold his liquor.

After three rounds of wine, Chen Guan's two sons came to toast their father and offer their congratulations on his appointment. Yan Qing now glanced over at the hunter brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao, and they caught his meaning. When no one was looking, they slipped a little something into the wine bottle.

Yan Qing now rose and said to Chen Guan, "Even though I did not bring any wine with me, allow me to offer you this cup to convey my congratulations."

He then filled a large goblet and offered it to Chen Guan, who drank it down. Yan Qing then also gave a cup each to Chen Guan's two sons, as well as some of the workhands who were stationed in the parlor.

Yan Qing now pursed his lips, and Xie Zhen immediately stepped outside, pulled out a firestarter, a small explosive, and a signal flag. Soon, a shot rang out from the manor. That was the signal, as reinforcements hiding nearby sprang into action. Inside the parlor, everyone who had drunk the drugged wine was passed out, and Yan Qing made quick work of them, cutting off their heads one by one with his dagger. Meanwhile, 10 chieftains, led by the likes of Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, Wu Song the Pilgrim, and Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, stormed into the manor, and the workhands were no match for them. And as Yan Qing and the Xie brothers walked out from the parlor with heads in tow, a unit of cavalry arrived with another six chieftains and 1,000 men. They surrounded the manor and killed everyone inside. They did spare a couple workhands and forced them to reveal where the Chen family's boats were. The workhands took them to a dock near the village, and there they found about 400 boats, loaded with grain. The chieftains did a quick count and then sent word to Song Jiang.

As soon as Song Jiang got word, he discussed the next step with Wu Yong. They then took their leave of their superior, Military Governor Zhang, and set out with the main army toward Chen Guan's residence. As part of the plan, the front column boarded the Chen family's ships and prepared to row them across the river.

They picked 300 fast ships and flew the rebel banners. A thousand soldiers wore the rebels' uniforms, while another 4,000 wore ordinary clothes. Within the 300 ships, another 20,000 men lay in wait. The chieftains Mu Hong the Unrestrained and Li Jun the River Dragon posed as Chen Guan's sons and each led a large ship. The rest of the ships were commanded by other chieftains. In all, this flotilla featured 42 chieftains on 300 ships. Once they set off, Song Jiang prepared his own warships, which carried men and horses, and got ready to sail across under his own banners.

Meanwhile, on the opposite bank at Runzhou Prefecture, the rebel sentries spotted 300 ships sailing toward them, flying their own colors and sporting banners that announced the fleet as delivering grain to them. The sentries reported this to Chancellor Lü, and he went out to the bank with crack troops and his 12 commanders to have a look. As the first 100 ships approached, they saw two leaders standing on two of the ships, surrounded by stalwart-looking men dressed in uniforms with a golden lock design.

Chancellor Lü dismounted and sat down in a command chair, while his 12 commanders staked out along the shoreline. Seeing this, the chieftains Mu Hong and Li Jun stood up in their ships and gave a signal, and their captains ordered the ships to halt. So the first 100 ships spread out in a line, while the 200 ships behind them caught up and split off to the left and right flanks, and they all dropped anchor.

A rebel officer now came on board to ask who they were, and Mu Hong told him, "We are the sons of Chen Guan and are coming to present 50,000 bushels of grain, 300 ships, and 5,000 crack troops to Chancellor Lü to thank him for his kindness in recommending us to the emperor."

"The chancellor sent a Captain Ye (4) across the river; where is he?" the officer asked.

“He and our man Wu (2) Cheng (2) both caught colds and are recovering and thus could not come. But we have the relevant documents here.”

The officer took the paperwork back to Chancellor Lü and told him that those were the sons of Chen Guan and that they had the original paperwork that had been sent with Captain Ye. After verifying the authenticity of the paperwork, Chancellor Lü summoned the two sons of Chen Guan onto land. So Mu Hong and Li Jun stepped onto shore, followed by 20 other chieftains. But the rebel soldiers shouted, “The chancellor is present. No one else may come near.” So the 20 chieftains stopped, and Mu Hong and Li Jun bowed from afar and stood at a distance. Then, the two of them were led closer, and they kneeled and paid their respects to Chancellor Lü.

“Why did your father not come himself?” the chancellor asked.

Mu Hong replied, “Our father heard that Song Jiang of Liangshan was leading an army this way. He was worried those bandits would disturb the villagers, so he stayed at home to keep an eye on things.”

“Which one of you is the elder brother?”

“I am,” Mu Hong said.

“Do you two have any fighting skills?”

“We have been trained.”

“How are you storing the rice that you’re delivering?”

“Three hundred bushels per large vessel, 100 bushels per small vessel.”

“There must be more to your coming here than just delivering grain,” the chancellor said.

“We and our father harbor nothing but a loyal heart. We would never dare to entertain any ulterior motive,” Mu Hong reassured him.

“That may be, but your soldiers look uncommon, and it’s hard to not be suspicious,” Chancellor Lü said. “You two stay here, while I send four commanders and 100 soldiers to inspect your ships. If they find any surprises, you will be punished severely.”

“We came hoping you will put us to good use,” Mu Hong said. “There’s no need for suspicion.”

Chancellor Lü was just about to order the inspection when a scout arrived and said, “An imperial edict has arrived outside the south gate. Please go receive it immediately.”

So Chancellor Lü hurriedly got back on his horse and told his men, “Keep watch over the shoreline, and have the two Chen brothers come with me.”

Mu Hong flashed Li Jun a look. Once the chancellor had gone on ahead, they and their 20 companions headed to the city gate, but the guards at the gate only allowed Mu Hong and Li Jun in, while keeping the other 20 men out.

At the south gate of the city, Chancellor Lü met the envoy from Fang La and asked what the urgent message was. The envoy was Fang La’s personal usher, and he whispered to the chancellor, “Recently the court astrologer reported that, according to the night sky, many star spirits were pouring into this area. About half of them emitted no light, a sure sign of serious trouble. His majesty has issued a decree instructing you to keep up a tight defense of the shoreline. Anyone coming from the north must be carefully questioned to suss out their true intentions. Anyone who appears strange should be executed immediately, without hesitation.”

Chancellor Lü was greatly alarmed. “We just received a group that seemed very suspicious,” he said. “And now this news. Please enter the city and read the decree.”

So the usher followed him to the prefectural office and read the decree. Just then, another scout rushed in and reported that an edict had arrived from Fang Mao (4), their emperor’s third brother. That message said, “Do not put your faith in Chen Guan’s surrender yet. There might be deception afoot. And recently, an imperial edict informed me that the court astrologer warned of stars entering this region. Protect the shoreline. I will send someone to supervise soon.”



“So the prince is also worried about this,” Chancellor Lü said. “Well, I have already ordered my men to keep a close eye on the river, and to not let a single man from those ships onto land.” He then held a banquet to welcome the two envoys.

Meanwhile, back on the riverbank, the Song forces on the 300 ships had been waiting for half a day, but still saw no movement. So they decided to press the issue. On the left flank, Zhang Heng (2) the Boat Flame and Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves led eight other chieftains and snuck onto land with weapons. On the right flank, another 10 chieftains also snuck onto land.

Then, they sprang into action, and the rebel soldiers guarding the riverbank were no match for them. Soon, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and the hunter brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao were storming the gates of the city. The guards rushed over to stop them, but Li Kui made quick work of them. As the Xie brothers charged into the city with tridents in hand, Li Kui just hung out by the gate, looking for people to kill.

When Chancellor Lü got word of this, he quickly ordered his men to go help, but the Song forces had already charged into the city. The 12 commanders under Chancellor Lü mobilized their units to resist them, but two of the commanders met a quick end by the city gates. The other 10 commanders fell back into the city to protect their families. Soon, the city was in chaos, Song Jiang’s banners were flying atop the city walls, and fighting broke out everywhere.

Meanwhile, inside the city, the chieftains Mu Hong and Li Jun were hanging out in a tavern when they got word that the assault was underway, so they started fires in the city. Soon, huge flames were roaring toward the sky, and that was the signal for the Song forces at the ferry point on the opposite bank, and they dispatched an army to provide backup. A fleet of 150 ships, carrying 10 chieftains and 2,000 cavalry, sailed across, and they poured into the city. Chancellor Lü, protected by some of his commanders, fled in defeat with some tattered remnants of his troops, running toward Dantu (1,2) County.

Once Song Jiang's forces had captured the city, they put out the fires, put guards at the four gates, and went to the riverbank to welcome Song Jiang. They watched Song Jiang's fleet sail across the river and dock on the south shore, and escorted him into the city. They then posted the usual "no civilians will be massacred today" notices.

Next, the chieftains started reporting their merits from the day's fighting. In all they slayed four of the 12 rebel commanders, captured two others, and killed countless minor officers.

And yet, there was some bad news, too. When Song Jiang did a head count, he found three second-tier chieftains missing: Song Wan the Giant in the Clouds, Jiao (1) Ting (2) the Faceless, and Tao (2) Zongwang (1,4) the Nine-Tailed Turtle. All three were killed by arrows or trampled by horses in the melee.

So all three of these guys were just minor chieftains, but this was a shocking development. In all their fighting up to this point, our heroes had never lost anyone from the ranks of their 108 chieftains. Not when they tussled with the Zhu (4) family. Not when they suffered setbacks against the Zeng (1) Family Village. Not when they stormed Daming Prefecture. Not when they took on the multiple large armies sent by the court to pacify them. And not when they went up against the forces of the Liao kingdom. And yet, today, three of their own were slain while capturing this city.

Song Jiang was very troubled by the loss of three chieftains, but Wu Yong consoled him, saying, "Life and death are preordained for every person. Even though we lost three brothers, we did capture the first key stronghold of the Southlands. So do not trouble yourself and hurt your health. If we want to serve the country, then we must keep our eyes on the big picture."

But Song Jiang said, "The 108 of us were preordained by heaven and in accordance with the stars. We first swore on Liangshan and then reaffirmed our oath on Wutai Mountain that we wish to live and die together. Yet, after we returned to the capital from the Liao campaign, first Gongsun Sheng left. And then the emperor kept Jin (1) Dajian (4,1) and Huangfu (2,3) Duan (1). Next Premier Cai took Xiao Rang

and District Commander Wang took Yue He. And today, we have just crossed the river, and we've already lost three brothers. And Song Wan especially. Even though he had not rendered any great service, he was a key contributor in the initial establishment of Liangshan. And now, he is in the underworld."

Song Jiang then ordered his men to set up an altar on the spot where Song Wan was killed and prepare sacrifices. He personally offered wine to the spirits of the slain chieftains, and executed the two captured rebel commanders on that spot to offer their blood as a sacrifice.

Then, Song Jiang returned to the prefectural office, handed out rewards to the men, and sent a report to Military Governor Zhang. His men, meanwhile, cleaned up all the corpses that littered the streets, burning them in a mass cremation outside the city. The bodies of three slain chieftains were buried outside the east gate.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Lü was holed up in Dantu (1,2) County after having lost most of his troops and half of his 12 commanders. He did not dare to mount a counterattack, so he sent word to Suzhou (1,1) Prefecture to ask Fang Mao (4), the imperial third brother, for help. Soon, a relief army arrived from Suzhou, led by a commander named Xing (2) Zheng (4). Chancellor Lü welcomed him and told him how Song Jiang used trickery to cross the river and take Runzhou Prefecture.

"Upon learning that star spirits were invading this region, the third prince sent me here to defend the river," Xing (2) Zheng (4) said. "But who knew you would suffer such a defeat. I will avenge you, and you may assist me in battle."

The next day, Xing Zheng led his forces toward Runzhou Prefecture, intent on recapturing the city. Meanwhile, Song Jiang had dispatched 5,000 troops led by 10 chieftains to go take Dantu (1,2) County. The two forces came across each other on the way and lined up for battle.

From the rebels' ranks, Xing Zheng rode out with spear in hand, while the six surviving commanders manned the flanks. From the Song forces' side, Guan Sheng the Great Saber galloped out wielding his

green dragon saber. The two exchanged blows for 15 bouts, but then Guan Sheng cut down his foe with one swing. Seeing this, Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs directed the Song forces to charge, and they put the enemy to flight toward the south. Seeing that his forces were defeated once again, Chancellor Lü abandoned Dantu County and fled toward Changzhou (2,1) Prefecture.

The chieftains occupied Dantu County and sent word of their victory to Song Jiang, who now marched his troops there, rewarded the soldiers, and sent an urgent dispatch to tell Military Governor Zhang to move into Runzhou Prefecture behind him to garrison that city. The next day, Governor Zhang sent his two staff officers to Song Jiang's camp with rewards, which Song Jiang distributed among his officers.

Having recovered one of the eight southern prefectures occupied by Fang La, Song Jiang now huddled with Lu Junyi to discuss their next steps. Four rebel prefectures lied in their path, and Song Jiang suggested that he and Lu Junyi draw lots to see who would attack which two prefectures. As it turned out, Song Jiang drew Changzhou (2,1) and Suzhou Prefectures, while Lu Junyi drew Xuanzhou (1,1) and Huzhou (2,1) Prefectures.

Song Jiang then asked the chieftain Pei (2) Xuan (1) the Iron-Faced Scribe to divide up the officers and troops. Among the chieftains, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast had fallen ill and could not travel with the army, so he stayed behind at Dantu (1,2) County to recover. The remaining chieftains were divided into two equal sets, with Song Jiang and Lu Junyi each leading 41. I'm not going to name every single guy in each unit, but I'll just note that they each got a strategist, with Zhu Wu accompanying Lu Junyi and Wu Yong following Song Jiang. And they each led 30,000 troops.

They also dispatched a naval unit, and this is where we need to back up a bit. In the last episode we mentioned that one of the two scouting parties they sent out consisted of Shi Xiu the Daredevil and Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest Ruan brother. Well, they didn't do much for the initial crossing of the river, but

they did make another contribution. The two of them slaughtered a family along the river and stole their boat — which I guess is just part of war — and they sailed to Jiaoshan (1,1), the other island in the middle of the Yangzi River. The abbot of the monastery on that island admired them for their deeds on Liangshan, so he offered them lodging and food. Later, they sailed from the island and captured a harbor that offered a good location for launching assaults on key locations along the sea coast. They then wrote to Song Jiang to ask for reinforcements.

So Song Jiang sent eight naval chieftains and 5,000 men to join Shi Xiu and Ruan Xiaoqi, along with 100 warships. The large ships would attack two key locations along the sea coast, while the small boats would sail into the streams around Dantu County and follow Song Jiang for his attack on Changzhou (2,1) Prefecture.

To see how the upcoming battles will go, tune into the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang gets depressed yet again. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!