

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 125.

Last time, Song Jiang continued to have success in his campaign against the rebels of the South. But that success continued to carry a high price, as he lost a few more chieftains while taking a couple prefectures. The casualty count was now up to eight. Nonetheless, he had now captured three of the rebels' eight prefectures and had just defeated Lü (3) Shinang (1,2), the rebels' Chancellor of Military Affairs, for the umpteenth time.

When Chancellor Lü fled to Suzhou Prefecture, the overseer there was not amused. This overseer was named Fang Mao (4) and he was the third brother of the rebel emperor Fang La. He wanted to execute Chancellor Lü for his repeated failures, but his general Wei (4) Zhong (1) said, "Song Jiang's troops are all seasoned veterans and they have lots of valiant heroes. And their foot soldiers all used to be Liangshan bandits, so they are also used to fighting. That's why they have been tough to beat."

Fang Mao now backed off and told Chancellor Lü, "I'll take a raincheck on your head for now. I'll give you 5,000 men to go on ahead. I will send a top general to provide backup."

Chancellor Lü thanked him for his leniency and then donned his armor, grabbed his spear, and rode out with his troops. Fang Mao also donned his armor and grabbed his halberd and set out with his eight top generals, who were all stout, skilled warriors, and about 30 lieutenants. They led a main army of 50,000 and went off to meet the incoming Song forces.

Chancellor Lü was leading the front column with the general Wei (4) Zhong (1) and a lieutenant. They headed back to the city of Wuxi (2,1), which they had just lost. Song Jiang got word of this and led his men out to face the enemy a few miles outside the city. When they met, Chancellor Lü rode out with spear in hand, ready to work out some frustration.

Song Jiang asked which of his officers would go out to meet Chancellor Lü, and Xu Ning the Golden Lancer promptly answered the call. While both sides cheered, the two warriors traded blows. After 20-some bouts, Xu Ning spotted an opening and skewered Chancellor Lü just under his ribs, killing him

and sending him to the ground. Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and his posse then led the charge and sent the rebel army fleeing.

As Song Jiang and company gave chase, they ran into the main rebel army led by Fang Mao, so the two sides lined up and prepared for a showdown. Fang Mao was irate when he heard that Chancellor Lü had been killed, so he rode out and cursed Song Jiang, "You all are just a gang of mountain bandits! The Song court is destined to lose if it's appointing you as its vanguard to invade our territory! Today, I will not stop until I have wiped out every last one of you!"

Pointing from his saddle, Song Jiang shot back, "You knaves are a gang of mere villagers. How dare you harbor thoughts of titles and empires? Surrender now, and I may spare you. The heavenly troops have arrived, and yet you still resist us with your nonsensical words. If I don't exterminate all of you, I swear I will not retreat!"

"Enough trash talk," Fang Mao shouted. "I have eight fierce warriors here. Do you dare to send eight of your own to fight them?"

Song Jiang laughed and scoffed, "If I send one more than you, then we are no heroes. You send your eight, and I will send eight of my own to test their skills against your men's to see who's better. If someone gets killed, then their side is allowed to retrieve their body. No cheap shots, and no stealing corpses. If they fight to standstill, we will not engage in a scrum, and will fight against tomorrow instead."

Fang Mao agreed and sent out his eight generals. For his part, Song Jiang sent out eight of his own, and these were Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Hua Rong the archer, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains, Sun Li the Sick Yuchi, and Hao (3) Siwen (1,2) the Wood Dog of Well. As the banners parted on Song Jiang's side, those eight officers galloped out to the front lines. As drums rolled and banners waved on both sides, a cannon shot rang out, and the 16 warriors each found an opponent and started dueling.

This mega-faceoff went on for 30 bouts when suddenly, one of the warriors fell off his horse. Zhu Tong, the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, had skewered his foe with his spear. At that, both sides beat gongs to call back their men, and the other seven pairs of warriors broke off their fights and returned to their lines.

Having lost one of his generals, Fang Mao figured today was not his day, so he led his army back to Suzhou Prefecture. Song Jiang, meanwhile, advanced his troops and pitched camp. He also rewarded Zhu Tong for his victory and informed his superiors of the latest good news.

Inside Suzhou Prefecture, Fang Mao decided to stay in and not fight. He dispatched his generals to keep a tight watch on each gate and beef up the city's defenses. The next day, Song Jiang saw that the enemy wasn't coming out, so he and 30-some riders went to size up the city. They saw that Suzhou was surrounded by waterways and had strong walls, which meant it would be difficult to sack the city quickly.

Upon returning to camp, Song Jiang consulted with Wu Yong. As they were talking, the naval chieftain Li Jun the River Dragon arrived in camp to report on the naval front. Song Jiang asked him about the situation along the sea coast.

As it turned out, the situation was great. The navy had just claimed two key locations along the coast, killing a number of enemy officers in the process. The other naval chieftains were on their way to attack the next two targets, while Li Jun had come to deliver the report. Song Jiang was delighted. He rewarded Li Jun and sent him to Changzhou Prefecture to relay the good news to their superiors.

Once Li Jun went to see their superiors and came back, Song Jiang kept him in camp because he figured only a naval battle could sack Suzhou Prefecture. So Li Jun scouted the waterways for two days and told Song Jiang, "The city is close to Lake Tai (4) to the south. I'd like to take a small boat and row along some narrow channels into Lake Tai and then onto the Wu (2) River to collect intel on the south bank. Then we can advance and attack the city on four sides, and it will fall for sure."

“You’re quite right,” Song Jiang said. “It matches my thoughts, too. But you don’t have any assistants.”

To get Li Jun some assistants, Song Jiang sent four chieftains to join the navy along the sea coast and recalled the two Tong brothers who used to be Li Jun’s smuggling associates. They were to accompany Li Jun on his reconnaissance mission. So Li Jun and the Tong brothers took a small boat and two rowers. The five of them set out along a narrow waterway and rowed into Lake Tai. This Lake Tai is a huge lake, and has long been renowned for its vast scenery. Li Jun and company now rowed across the lake toward the Wu (2) River. In the distance, they saw a fleet of fishing boats numbering about 50.

“Let’s pretend to be buying fish and go check it out,” Li Jun said.

So they rowed over to the fleet, and Li Jun asked if they had big fish.

“If you want big fish, then follow us to our home, and we’ll sell you some,” a fisherman told them.

So Li Jun followed the guy and they soon approached a little inlet lined with bendy willow trees and about 20 houses. The fisherman tied up his boat and led Li Jun and the two Tong brothers onto shore and toward a manor.

As soon as they set foot inside the manor, the fisherman coughed, and immediately seven or eight stout men sprang out with hooks and latched onto Li Jun and the Tong brothers. They hustled them into the manor and tied them to wooden stakes.

Li Jun looked around and saw four stout men sitting in the thatched parlor. Their leader had a red beard and yellow hair and wore a blue quilted tunic. The second guy was skinny and tall, had a short mustache and wore a dark green cotton shirt with a round collar. The third guy had a dark face with a long beard. The fourth man had a broad, bony face, with a curly beard shaped like a spade. They all wore broad-brimmed hats of black felt and carried weapons.

“Where are you people from?! What are you doing on my lake?!” the leader barked at Li Jun.

“We are from Yangzhou Prefecture and came here to buy fish,” Li Jun answered.

The fourth guy chimed in, “Brother, no need to ask them questions. They are obviously spies. Just cut out their hearts so I can use them to chase my wine.”

When he heard that, Li Jun thought to himself, “I smuggled for years on the Sundown River and then played hero on Liangshan for a few years. Who knew my life would end here today?”

He sighed and looked over to the Tong brothers and said, “It’s all my fault, bringing you down with me. And now, we are going to die together!”

“Say no such thing, brother,” Tong Wei and Tong Meng replied. “Death doesn’t matter. It’s just a pity that dying here like this will taint your great reputation!”

At that, the three of them puffed out their chests and awaited their fate. But the four fishermen heard what they said and observed their mannerisms, and then they talked amongst themselves, saying, “Their leader is clearly not a lowly person.”

So the leader of the fishermen asked Li Jun, “Who are you all? Tell us your names.”

“If you want to kill us, then kill us. We will never tell you our names, lest it gets out and we become laughingstocks among heroes.”

Hearing that, the leader of the fishermen figured these three must be men of valor, so he jumped up, cut off the ropes, and released them. The four fishermen then asked Li Jun and company to have a seat, and their leader bowed and said, “We have been outlaws all our lives, and we have never seen valiants the likes of you! Brothers, who are you? Please tell us your names.”

Li Jun replied, “You all seem like men of valor, so we will tell you, and you can do with us what you will. We are officers under Song Jiang of Liangshan. My name is Li Jun the River Dragon. These two are my brothers, Tong Wei the Cave-Emerging Crab and Tong Meng the River-Churning Clam. We accepted amnesty from the court, recently defeated the Liao kingdom, and now we are here to pacify Fang La. If you are his servants, then turn us in for a reward. We will not resist.”

When the four fishermen heard their names, they fell to their knees and said, "We were blind and did not recognize greatness. Please forgive our offense just now. We four are not part of Fang La's rebels. We used to be bandits who made our living in the woods. Then we discovered this place, which is called the Elm Willow Manor. It's surrounded by deep channels that cannot be traversed without boats. Fishing is our cover, and we actually make our living by nabbing whatever we can on the lake. Last winter we learned how to swim, and now no one dares to mess with us. We have long heard that Song Jiang of Liangshan was gathering heroes from across the land. We have also heard of your great name, and that of a Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. Who knew we would meet you today."

Li Jun told them, "Zhang Shun is my brother and a fellow naval leader. He is pacifying rebels along the sea coast right now, but I'll bring him here someday to make your acquaintance. Please tell me your names."

The fishermen's leader said, "Because we have been running in outlaw circles, we all have odd names. Please don't laugh at us. My name is Fei (4) Bao (3) the Red-Bearded Dragon. The others are Ni (2) Yun (2) the Curly-Maned Tiger, Bu (3) Qing (1) the Lake Tai Python, and Di (2) Cheng (2) the Thin-Faced Bear."

Li Jun was delighted to make their acquaintance and said, "Now we have no need to be suspicious of each other. Turns out we are all of the same trade. My brother Song Jiang is the vanguard general for the army sent to pacify Fang La. He is trying to take Suzhou Prefecture but hasn't found a way to do so, so he sent the three of us to conduct recon. Why don't you all follow me back to meet him, and I will recommend you for official positions. Once we have pacified Fang La, the court will make good use of you."

But the fishermen leader Fei (4) Bao (3) said, "If the four of us wanted to be officials, we could have become commanders under Fang La long ago. We don't want to be officials; we just want to live

carefree. If you need our help, we will go through water and fire for you. But if you want to recommend us for official posts, then we must decline.”

Li Jun said, “In that case, let’s swear the oath of brotherhood right here right now. What do you think?”

The four fishermen were delighted at that suggestion. They slaughtered a pig and a sheep, and set up a feast and became sworn brothers with Li Jun and the two Tong brothers.

That done, the seven of them started discussing how Song Jiang could sack Suzhou Prefecture.

“Fang Mao refuses to come out to fight, and the city is surrounded by water with no land route for launching an attack,” Li Jun said. “And the channels are narrow, making it hard for ships to advance. How can we breach the city?”

Fei Bao told him, “Brother, don’t worry. Just stay here for a couple days. Fang La’s people frequently travel from Hangzhou Prefecture to Suzhou for business. We can use that opportunity and devise a scheme to take the city. I will send a few fishermen to go gather intel. When someone comes this way, we will have a plan.”

Li Jun agreed, so Fei Bao sent a few fishermen out to see what they could sniff out, while he and his brothers entertained Li Jun at their manor each day. After about three days, the fishermen came back and said, “There are 10 cargo ships at Pingwang (2,4) County. They are flying yellow banners that say, “Royal Armor.” They must be coming from Hangzhou Prefecture. There are only about five or six people on each ship.”

“That’s our opportunity,” Li Jun said. “Brothers, please help me.”

“Let’s set out right away then,” Fei Bao said.

“But if even one person from the ships get away, the plan will be a bust,” Li Jun cautioned.

“Don’t worry, brother. You can count on us,” Fei Bao reassured him.

They then gathered about 70 small fishing boats, and each of the seven men took one boat, accompanied by other fishermen. They stashed hidden weapons on their bodies, and sailed through the small channels into the main river and scattered.

That night, the sky was lit up by the moon and countless stars. The 10 cargo ships were docked next to a temple on the east bank of the river. Fei Bao's boat arrived on the scene first. He let out a whistle, and all 70 fishing boats closed in. When the people on the cargo vessels stepped out of their cabins, they were immediately snared by hooks and bound up. Anyone who dived into the water to escape was also snared and pulled back onto the ships. Soon, the cargo vessels were being escorted by the flotilla of fishing boats toward the deep parts of Lake Tai (4), and they arrived back at the fishermen's manor around 3 a.m.

The outlaws now tied up most of the men from the cargo ships into one long chain, attached heavy boulders to that chain, and sent them all to a watery grave at the bottom of the lake. They kept only two guys who were in charge of the cargo run and questioned them. They revealed that they were storehouse keepers for Fang La's crown prince, Fang Tianding (1,4). The prince had ordered them to deliver 3,000 suits of armor to Fang Mao in Suzhou Prefecture. Li Jun asked them for their names and got their official paperwork, and then quickly dispatched both of them as well.

"Now I must go discuss this with Brother Song before we can proceed," Li Jun said.

Fei Bao sent a couple men to row Li Jun to near his camp, and Li Jun told the rest of the gang to hide the cargo ships and armor behind their manor. He then set out and soon arrived back in camp and relayed to Song Jiang what had transpired.

The strategist Wu Yong was delighted by this news and said to Song Jiang, "In that case, Suzhou is within reach. Please order Li Kui, Bao Xu, Xiang Chong, and Li Gun to lead 200 shield-bearers to follow Li

Jun back to the fishermen's manor and proceed in such and such a manner. We will make our move on the second day."

So Li Jun returned to Lake Tai with Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and Li Kui's posse of berserkers and the 200 shield-bearers. They all sailed back to the fishermen's manor. The fishermen were all astounded by the ... umm ... unique appearances of Li Kui and company, and they welcomed the party with a feast.

On the agreed-upon date, Fei Bao and one of his brothers disguised themselves as the cargo overseers, while their fishermen dressed up as the rowers on the cargo ships. Inside the cabin of the ships, Li Kui and his 200 shield-bearers lay in wait. Two of the fishermen brought up the rear with ships carrying fire-starting material.

They were just about to head out when word came that a boat was zig-zagging across the lake. Li Jun thought that was kind of odd, so he rushed out to have a look. He recognized two of the men in that boat, and they were Dai Zong the Magic Traveler and Ling Zhen the Sky-Quaking Thunder. They rowed to shore and greeted him.

"Brother Song forgot something when he sent Li Kui here," Dai Zong said. "So he sent me and Ling Zhen to deliver a 100-shot cannon. We couldn't catch up to you on the lake, and did not dare to land on these unknown banks. He wants you to enter the city at dawn. Once you are in, fire this cannon as a signal."

The fishermen now treated these two visitors to wine as well, and Ling Zhen and the 10 artillerymen that he had brought hid themselves on the third cargo ship.

That night around 3 a.m., the fleet set out for Suzhou Prefecture. They arrived around 5 a.m. The guards atop the city walls recognized their own banner and hurriedly reported this to their superiors. One of Fang Mao's generals was overseeing that gate, so he personally came to the wall to question the guards and examine the paperwork, which was pulled up to the top of the wall in a basket. This general

then relayed the paperwork to Fang Mao, who verified its authenticity and then dispatched more men to take a closer look at this fleet before letting them into the city.

The general sat down next to the water gate and instructed his men to board the ships. They went aboard and saw that they were indeed loaded with armor. Satisfied, they now allowed the 10 ships into the city one by one and then closed the gate behind them.

The inspector sent by Fang Mao waited on shore with 500 soldiers. Once the ships entered the city, they docked and the inspector prepared to go have a closer look. But just then, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and his posse stormed out from the cabins. The inspector noticed their rough appearance and was just about to ask who they were, but he couldn't even get his question out before a flying dagger from the shield-bearers Xiang Chong and Li Gun struck him and sent him off his horse. The inspector's 500 soldiers tried to board the ships, but Li Kui had already jumped onto land and started lopping off heads left and right. In the blink of an eye, more than a dozen soldiers lay dead, and the rest had fled. The other chieftains and the 200 shield-bearers now charged onto land and started fires everywhere. Meanwhile, Ling Zhen rolled out his cannon and let off a dozen or so shots in a row, making buildings tremble throughout the city.

The city's overseer Fang Mao was just deliberating with his staff in his residence when he heard the string of cannon shots, which scared him out of his wits. At every gate, the rebel soldiers and officers heard the sound of cannons from inside the city. Soon, urgent dispatches came from every gate, saying, "Our troops have been killed by enemy archers, and the enemy forces have taken the walls."

Chaos erupted within Suzhou, as an unknown number of Song soldiers poured into the city. Li Kui and his posse just stormed to and fro, wreaking havoc and killing rebel soldiers. Li Jun, Dai Zong, and the fishermen protected Ling Zhen while he continued to fire his cannons. Meanwhile, Song Jiang had dispatched three armies, and they now charged into the city, sending the enemy fleeing in every direction.

Fang Mao hurriedly donned his armor and climbed onto his horse, and tried to fight his way out through the south gate under the protection of about 700 armored soldiers. But he ran smack dab into Li Kui and company, who sent his soldiers running for their lives. Then, from a narrow alley, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk flashed out and attacked. Fang Mao could not hold his own, and rode alone back toward his residence. But from under a bridge emerged Wu Song the Pilgrim. With one swing of his twin sabers, he cut off Fang Mao's horse's legs. Fang Mao fell to the ground, and Wu Song quickly finished him off with another hack of the sabers, cutting off his head and taking it to Song Jiang.

By now, Song Jiang had already set up his headquarters in Fang Mao's residence. Once the city was under his control, he sent out word to avoid harming the civilians and to put out the fires. He then put up the usual propaganda posters, while his officers came to present, umm, evidence of their service from the night's fighting. Wu Song presented the head of Fang Mao, and other chieftains had either killed or captured Fang Mao's generals. Only one rebel general managed to escape with some tattered forces.

But this latest victory came with its own cost, too. The chieftain Xuan (1) Zan (4) the Ugly Prince Consort had fought an enemy general to the death, as both died from their injuries under a bridge. Song Jiang was again heartbroken over the loss of yet another brother, the ninth, if you're keeping count. And he arranged for a fine coffin and burial for Xuan Zan at the foot of a nearby mountain.

He then sent Fang Mao's head and the two captured rebel generals to his superiors, who promptly had the prisoners cut to pieces in the public marketplace and sent Fang Mao's head to the capital. In return, Song Jiang's army received handsome rewards, which were distributed to the officers.

The rewards were accompanied by orders for District Commander Liu to move in and garrison Suzhou Prefecture while Song Jiang was ordered to keep advancing. District Commander Liu arrived the next day and was welcomed in by Song Jiang. Song Jiang and his officers then began discussing their next steps, and they sent men to see how the battle on the sea coasts was going. A report soon arrived,

saying that as soon as word of Suzhou's capture spread, all the rebels in the counties along the sea coast fled, and the coast had now been pacified. Song Jiang was very pleased and reported the victory to his superiors in writing, requesting that Military Governor Zhang restore all former Song officials to their posts in those areas. He then ordered various commanders to take control of those counties, so that his naval chieftains could rejoin him in Suzhou for other deployments.

A few days passed, and the naval chieftains returned to Suzhou. But they brought some bad news with them. Two more chieftains had been lost in their campaign. These were Shi (1) En (1) the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub, the guy who had asked Wu Song to help him take back his protection money racket once upon a time, and Kong Liang the Lonely Fiery Star, the younger of the two Kong brothers who had taken Song Jiang in for a time while he was on the lam for the murder his mistress. Shi En and Kong Liang did not die in combat, however. Instead, they fell into the water and drowned because they didn't know how to swim, which raises all sorts of questions about why you would send guys on a naval campaign who didn't know how to tread water. But in any case, the chieftain casualty count ticked up again, and Song Jiang was left brooding and sighing once more.

Meanwhile, the four fishermen outlaws who had helped Li Jun sack the city now came to take their leave. Song Jiang tried to keep them, but they declined, and so Song Jiang rewarded them handsomely and had Li Jun and the Tong brothers escort them back to their manor. Once there, the fishermen again feasted with the trio. During this feast, the leader, Fei Bao, told Li Jun something. To see what he had to say, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang moves on to conquer another popular tourist attraction. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!