

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 126.

Last time, Song Jiang captured Suzhou Prefecture, a major stronghold of the southern rebels. His forces received some help from four local outlaws turned fishermen who had become sworn brothers with the chieftains Li Jun the River Dragon and the two Tong brothers. After the victory, Li Jun and the Tong brothers escorted the fishermen back to their manor on Lake Tai (4).

During their parting feast, the leader of the fishermen, Fei (4) Bao (3), said to Li Jun, “Brother, I am a foolish oaf, but I have heard smart people say, ‘All successes are accompanied by failures, and all that waxes must wane.’ It has been decades since you first became an outlaw, and you have won every battle. When you all went to war against the Liao kingdom, you did not lose a single brother. Yet now, on this campaign to pacify Fang La, it’s apparent that you are running out of steam and will not last much longer. Do you know why I refuse to become a government official? Because once peace has been attained, they will come after you all and kill you one by one. As the old saying goes, ‘Generals may keep the peace, but they are not allowed to have peace.’ That saying is spot on. Since the four of us have become sworn brothers with the three of you, why not act now, before the tide turns against you, to find a refuge, get some money, a large ship, and some men, and set sail to find a quiet, safe place somewhere out on the seas to live out your life?”

When he heard this, Li Jun kowtowed to Fei Bao and said, “Brother, thank you for pointing the way on my misguided path. Your counsel is perfect. It’s just that we have not yet eliminated Fang La, and I cannot bear to abandon Brother Song, so I cannot take that step yet. If I go with you all today, I’d be turning my back on honor. But if you are willing to wait for me, once we have pacified Fang La, the three of us will come here to join you. I hope you will accommodate us. Start preparing for that move now. If I go back on this promise, I am no real man and may heaven scorn me.”

The four fishermen told him, “We will prepare the ship and wait for you. You must not break your promise!”

Li Jun and Fei Bao then swore an oath over a cup of wine. The next day, Li Jun and the Tong brothers returned to camp and told Song Jiang that their friends refused to become officials and were quite content being just fishermen. Song Jiang lamented this for a while, and then ordered his army and navy to set out for their next target, Xiuzhou (4,1) Prefecture. The general in charge of that prefecture was already planning to run away after hearing about the death of Fang Mao, the imperial brother who oversaw Suzhou Prefecture and was killed when that city fell. When word came that Song Jiang's large army and navy were coming his way, this guy was scared witless. As soon as the front column of Song Jiang's army arrived, he went to the city wall and shouted down that he would surrender. Sure enough, he opened the gates and welcomed Song Jiang in with pageantry. Song Jiang congratulated the city's civilians for returning to the path of the righteous and rewarded the general for surrendering. That guy eventually became part of the entourage for Military Governor Zhang.

Once he settled in, Song Jiang asked the general about the next target, the major stronghold of Hangzhou (2,1) Prefecture. And by the way, both Hangzhou and the previous prefecture they sacked, Suzhou, have long been famous tourist attractions because of their beautiful lakes and waterways. So if you ever get the chance to see them, I highly recommend it.

Song Jiang was told that Hangzhou was densely populated with a wide moat and thick walls. There are land routes connecting to the city from the east and north. On the south side is the great river, and to the west is a large lake. It's overseen by Fang La's eldest son, Fang Tianding (1,4). He had 70,000 troops, 24 generals, and 4 commanders at his disposal. All of them were stout warriors, and two were particularly fearsome. One was a monk named Deng (4) Yuanjue (2,2), who wielded a steel Buddhist staff that weighed some 50 catties, and he was also dubbed the Buddhist of Precious Light and the Imperial Preceptor. The other was named Shi (2) Bao (3), who was skilled with a throwing mallet on a chain, with which he never missed. He also wielded a saber called the Wind Splitter that could cut bronze and iron and could slice through three layers of armor.

Song Jiang now transferred oversight of Xiuzhou Prefecture to District Commander Liu, while he moved his forces forward and pitched camp. He then assembled the officers for a banquet to celebrate their success and to discuss how to attack Hangzhou. During the feast, Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind rose and said to Song Jiang, "Brother, ever since you saved my life, I have received your adoration and enjoyed glory and comfort despite rendering meager service. I am willing to go spy on the enemy. If that can help you win a battle, it would repay the court and make you look good, too. Will you allow it?"

Song Jiang was delighted and gave his consent. Chai Jin then asked to take Yan Qing the Prodigy along, given his smarts and repertoire of skills. Song Jiang said sure, but Yan Qing is in Lu Junyi's army right now. But just then, word came that Lu Junyi had sent Yan Qing to deliver a report.

"Now, your success is guaranteed!" Song Jiang said to Chai Jin with excitement. "Yan Qing's arrival is a good omen."

Once Yan Qing came in, he paid his respects to Song Jiang and drank a cup of wine. Song Jiang then asked him about Lu Junyi's siege on Huzhou (2,1) Prefecture. Yan Qing told him that Lu Junyi had divided his forces into two armies and personally led one army to attack Huzhou Prefecture. He made quick work of the rebels there, killing the commander and all his generals and sacking the city. But the other army was having some more problems. That one, under the command of Lin Chong the Panther Head, was trying to take Lone Pine Pass, which lay on the way to Hangzhou Prefecture, and they hadn't been able to. So Lu Junyi left Huyan Zhuo the Twins Staffs to oversee Huzhou Prefecture while he and his strategist Zhu Wu went to help Lin Chong.

After asking about the details of the troop deployments, Song Jiang told Yan Qing that Chai Jin had requested his companionship on a dangerous mission behind enemy lines, and Yan Qing agreed to go. Chai Jin laid out his plan, and the two packed and headed out.

Once they left, Song Jiang turned his attention back to Hangzhou Prefecture. The strategist Wu Yong said, "The southern half of Hangzhou borders the great Qiantang (2,2) River, which empties into the sea. A few men can steer a boat around the coast, pass through Zheshan (3,1) Gate, and get near the south entrance to the city. They can set up our banners and set off signal cannons from there, and that will put the city on edge. Which naval chieftains are willing to go?"

Immediately, Zhang Heng the Boat Flame and the three Ruan brothers all volunteered. Song Jiang said, "Hangzhou borders a lake on the west side, and we'll need naval support there, too, so you can't all go."

Wu Yong now ordered Zhang Heng and Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest Ruan brother, to go, along with two other chieftains, Hou (2) Jian (4) the Long-Armed Ape and Duan (4) Jingzhu (3,4) the Golden-Haired Hound. The four of them led 30-some sailors and took a dozen or so banners and cannons. They found some ships along the sea coast and set off toward Qiantang (2,2) River.

Once he was done deploying troops, Song Jiang returned to Xiuzhou (4,1) Prefecture to discuss next steps. Just then, an envoy arrived from the capital to present imperial wine as a reward. Song Jiang and his officers left the city to receive this gift and then treated the envoy to a feast. As they drank, the envoy produced a second letter, this one from the royal hospital. It said, "His majesty has come down with some minor ailment and wants An Daoquan the Miracle Healer to return to the capital to tend to him. He has issued a decree to summon An Daoquan back." Song Jiang, of course, did not dare to say no, so the next day, An Daoquan left with the envoy.

After seeing the envoy off, Song Jiang distributed the rewards to his officers and then selected an auspicious day to set out. He took leave of his superiors and headed off with both the navy and army toward Hangzhou.

Inside Hangzhou, the city's overseer, Fang La's eldest son Fang Tianding (1,4), gathered his 28 officers and told them, "The enemy's vanguard general Song Jiang is coming at us from land and water. Since he crossed the Yangzi River into the South, we have lost three major prefectures to him. Hangzhou is the shield of the South. If this city falls, then our next stronghold, Muzhou (4,1) Prefecture, will be at risk. Previously, the court astrologer warned of numerous star spirits invading the South and bringing trouble. That must be referring to this group that's invading our land. You all have received high positions from the court, so you must repay the country loyally. Don't slip up and disappoint the court."

All the officers reassured him, "My lord, do not worry! We have plenty of strong troops and fierce warriors who have yet to face Song Jiang. Even though we lost a number of cities, it's all because they were not overseen by the right people. We have heard that Song Jiang and Lu Junyi are coming in three directions to take Hangzhou. Your lordship and the Imperial Preceptor are defending this city with the utmost care, and it can withstand any siege. We will go and meet the enemy in every direction."

Fang Tianding was delighted by this enthusiasm, and he dispatched three armies to go meet Song Jiang and Lu Junyi's three armies, keeping only the imperial preceptor, the monk Deng (4) Yuanjue (2,2), to help him defend the city. Each of his other three commanders led one of the armies, along with some of the generals and 30,000 men each. Two of the armies went off to help lift the siege on other key locations, while the third, led by the commander Shi (2) Bao (3) and eight generals, went to meet Song Jiang's main force.

As Song Jiang's main army was passing a place called Linping (2,2) Mountain, they noticed a red flag waving atop the peak. So Song Jiang sent Hua Rong the archer and Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt to go investigate. The two of them led 1,000 men to go conduct recon. As soon as they turned around the mouth of a canyon, they ran into the rebel army led by two of the generals under the command of Shi Bao, and they immediately tangled with each other. After 10 bouts, Hua Rong and Qin Ming noticed that

the rebels had backup coming down the road, so they shouted for a temporary pause in the action. As both sides returned to their own lines, Hua Rong told Qin Ming, "Nevermind the fight; we must report this to Brother Song at once, and then figure out what to do next."

So their rear column rushed the news to the main army, and Song Jiang rode up to the front lines with four other chieftains: Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains, and Sun Li the Sick Yuchi. When the rebels saw this, their two generals cursed and shouted, "How dare you come fight again after we've already beaten you?!"

Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt was enraged by that slight, and he galloped out to take on one of the generals. The other rebel general, meanwhile, challenged Hua Rong to a rematch. But Xu Ning the Golden Lancer answered his call instead. But even as Xu Ning rode out, Hua Rong rode right behind him. Before Xu Ning and his foe even traded blows, Hua Rong let fly an arrow that struck the rebel general and sent him off his horse. That took the fight out of the rebel soldiers. The other rebel general was so startled by his comrade's fate that he slowed down just a bit, and in that split second, Qin Ming's wolf-toothed mace came down on his head. The next thing you know, the rebel soldiers were running for their lives minus two generals. Song Jiang's forces charged and put the rebels to flight, and the rebels ended up falling back into the city of Hangzhou.

The next day, Song Jiang advanced again and divided his army into three units to attack Hangzhou. One unit was infantry, and they went to attack the east gate. The second unit was the navy, which went to attack the west gate on the lake. The third unit consisted of cavalry, infantry, and navy, and they attacked the north gate.

That third unit was led by Guan Sheng the Great Saber, and they ventured very close to the city but did not meet any resistance. Guan Sheng got suspicious and fell back a bit and sent word to Song Jiang.

Song Jiang told Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to relay his instructions, which said, "Do not advance rashly; send two chieftains out to conduct recon each day."

The first day, it was Hua Rong the archer and Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt leading the recon, and they saw no movement. The next day, it was Xu Ning the Golden Lancer and Hao (3) Siwen (1,2) the Wood Dog of Well, and they also saw no movement. This went on for several days.

Then, one day, it was again Xu Ning and Hao Siwen's turn. They rode out with a few dozen riders, and when they went by the north gate of the city, they saw that it was wide open. Curious, they rode closer to the drawbridge to have a look. Suddenly, drums rolled from atop the walls, and a detachment of enemy cavalry dashed out of the city. Xu Ning and Hao Siwen quickly fell back, but now, they heard cries rise up from the west, as another hundred or so enemy riders cut off their path of retreat.

Xu Ning put up a dogged fight and cut his way through the enemy. But when he turned around, he did not see Hao Siwen behind him. He took a closer look and saw a number of enemy officers surrounding Hao Siwen and capturing him alive, taking him into the city. Xu Ning tried to ride to his comrade's rescue, but was suddenly struck by an arrow in his neck. He fled with the arrow still lodged in him, while six enemy officers chased after him.

Fortunately for Xu Ning, Guan Sheng the Saber met him on the way and fought off the enemy. Unfortunately for Xu Ning, he collapsed soon thereafter from the loss of blood. When Song Jiang got word of this, he rushed to see Xu Ning and found that he was bleeding profusely from every orifice. Song Jiang wept and summoned an army doctor. They removed the arrow, applied a salve to Xu Ning's wound, and transported him to the cabin of a warship to rest, where Song Jiang personally kept an eye on him.

But that night, Xu Ning passed out three or four times. Only now did they realize that he had been hit with a poisoned arrow. Song Jiang looked to the heavens and lamented, "An Daoquan the Miracle Healer has been summoned back to the capital, and there are no good doctors here. This will surely cost my brother's life!"

So yeah, maybe it wasn't the best use of resources to call back your army's best doctor to treat whatever minor ailment was afflicting the emperor, especially considering the emperor probably had a whole gaggle of high-price physicians at his beck and call. Anyway, as Song Jiang sat grieving, Wu Yong came to persuade him to return to camp to tend to military matters, telling him, "You must not ignore the affairs of state on account of your grief." So Song Jiang sent Xu Ning back to Xiuzhou (4,1) Prefecture to recover.

Song Jiang now sent spies to find news about the chieftain Hao Siwen, who had been captured by the enemy. The next day, a soldier came back and said, "The enemy has hung up Hao Siwen's head on a bamboo pole for public display over the north gate. Turns out Fang Tianding had him cut to pieces."

Song Jiang was heartbroken once more. Then, about two weeks later, he got even more bad news from Xiuzhou Prefecture: The poison from the arrow that hit Xu Ning was untreatable, and Xu Ning had died from his wound. So not only is the body count continuing to tick up, we are now beyond just knocking off a few middling chieftains for shock value. Xu Ning, remember, was one of the Eight Cavalry Tiger Vanguard on Liangshan, so he was among their better fighters. After this setback, Song Jiang kept his army in camp on the main thoroughfare for the time being.

We'll go check in now on the unit led by the naval chieftains. They were camped out on the road leading to the west gate and sending men into the nearby hills to scout out the roads. While there, they got word that the chieftains Hao Siwen and Xu Ning had been killed. Li Jun the River Dragon and Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves, the two chieftains leading this unit, conferred and decided that they were in too exposed a position on the main thoroughfare, as this was a key choke point on the way to and from other key rebel strongholds, so they were likely to be constantly harassed. They decided to move their forces into the nearby western hills and made camp by a monastery. There, they could use the West Lake as their battleground and they also had access to a back road for retreat if needed.

After a couple weeks, Zhang Shun went to see Li Jun and said, "The rebels have all fallen back into Hangzhou. We have been garrisoned here for half a month without seeing any action. How can we accomplish anything by staying in the hills? I want to swim across the lake to the city's water gate and start a fire as a signal. Then Brother Song can launch an attack to seize the water gate, and then all three armies can attack the city at once."

"That's a good idea," Li Jun said, "but I worry you would be outnumbered and unable to pull it off."

"Even if I sacrifice my life, it would be a small price to repay Brother Song for all the kindness he has shown me over the years," Zhang Shun said.

"Hold on, let me go inform him first so he can prepare his forces," Li Jun said.

But Zhang Shun told him, "You can inform him while I go on my mission. Then, by the time I get into the city, he will know."

So that evening, Zhang Shun stashed a dagger, ate a full meal, and went to the edge of West Lake. This West Lake is legendary for its beauty and is one of those must-see sights if you visit China. But at this time, the lake's scenery was quite different from the prosperous, buzzing tourist attraction that it would become during the Southern Song Dynasty. This was, as they said, before everything became so commercialized. Zhang Shun looked out across the lake and saw green hills on three sides, and azure water as far as the eye could see. In the distance, he saw the city of Hangzhou and four gates leading into it.

As he stood on a bridge and gazed out at this tranquil scene of blue water and green hills, Zhang Shun could feel the warmth of the spring evening. He said to himself, "I was born on the Sundown River and experienced countless strong winds and waves, but I have never seen such an enthralling body of water. Even if I die here, I would be a happy ghost."

Then, he took off his shirt, put it under the bridge, tied his hair in a topknot with red yarn, tied a skirt around his waist with a sash, hung his dagger from the sash, and took off his shoes. He then plunged into the water and swam beneath the surface toward the city.

It was around 7 p.m., and there was just the faintest bit of light coming from the moon. Zhang Shun made his way over to one of the water gates on the opposite side of the lake. There, he poked his head out of the water and listened intently. The drum signaling the time indicated that it was now close to 9 o'clock. There was no one outside the city walls, but on the ramparts, about four or five soldiers kept watch, so Zhang Shun ducked back into the water.

After a bit, he poked his head back up, and saw that there was now no one on the ramparts. He swam in the channel beneath the water gate, but found it blocked by an iron grate, and behind that, a heavy drape. The grate was firmly in place and could not be removed, so Zhang Shun reached through it and tried to grab the drape, but the drape had a string of bells attached to it, so when Zhang Shun tugged on it, the bells sounded, and immediately soldiers atop the walls shouted to each other.

Zhang Shun quickly slipped back into the lake through the underwater channel. When the guards looked down from the top of the wall, they didn't see anything.

"Hmm, maybe it was a big fish that swam in along the currents and swam into the drape?" they said to each other. After looking around some more and finding nothing, they went back to sleep.

Zhang Shun now waited for a couple more hours. When he heard the drum sound the time for 11 p.m., he figured the guards must be sound asleep by now, so he swam toward the city again. Figuring that there was no way in under water, he now climbed ashore to have a look. He did not see a single guard atop the wall, so he thought about scaling the wall. But then he thought, "If I climb up there and there is somebody there, I would be throwing my life away. Let me test it out first."

So he grabbed a couple clumps of soil and threw them onto the top of the wall. That induced more shouting from a few guards who had not gone to bed, and they again went down to check out the water

gate but saw nothing there. They then climbed up to a watch tower and surveyed the surface of the lake, but did not see a single boat, since all the boats had been confiscated and brought inside the city per the order of its overseer.

“Well that’s strange,” the guards said. “Must’ve been a ghost. Forget it. Let’s go back to bed.”

Zhang Shun listened for another two hours and heard nothing but silence. He again approached the foot of the wall and threw another clump of soil. This time, there was no reaction from the top.

“It’s already 3 a.m.,” he thought to himself. “If I’m going to climb up, it has to be now.”

So he started scaling the wall. But when he was halfway up, he suddenly heard a loud rat-tat-tat, and a host of guards appeared at the top. Zhang Shun quickly leaped into the channel below and swam back toward the lake. As he did so, a shower of arrows, javelins, and stones flew at him from above.

To see if Zhang Shun can get away unscathed, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we get another report on more off-screen action from Lu Junyi. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!