

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 134.

Last time, Song Jiang and his chieftains, all 27 that remained anyway, returned to the capital and finally received the ranks and rewards they were due. Song Jiang was appointed the governor of Chuzhou (3,1) Prefecture, but before he took office there, he was allowed to take some leave and go home to Yuncheng County to see his family. So he and his brother Song Qing returned to Song Family Village, and they were given a hero's welcome by their relatives and village elders.

But when they got home, they discovered that their father, Old Squire Song, had died while they were on campaign, and his body was lying in state, awaiting their return for burial. The two brothers were grief-stricken and wept bitterly.

Once their grief had subsided a bit, the workhands on the estate came to pay their respects, and the brothers found that all the property around the estate were maintained as tidily as when the old squire was still alive. Song Jiang now held a service for his father, inviting monks and priests to come offer prayers for his departed parents and ancestors. Officials from the county and the prefecture also streamed in with their condolences. The brothers picked an auspicious date for the burial, and they served as pallbearers, carrying their father's body to a high plateau and laying him to rest. Naturally, local officials, neighbors, elders, friends, and family all turned out for the ceremony.

After taking care of his father, Song Jiang turned his thoughts to the Mystic Queen, the goddess who gave him the divine scrolls and who had saved him multiple times. He had once promised to rebuild her temple if he ever fulfilled his wish of getting to serve the country again. Now that his wish had come true, it was time to make good on the promise. So he hired craftsmen and builders to renovate her temple that cost 50,000 strings of coins. It had two covered walkways, a mountain gate, a statue of the Mystic Queen, and painted decorations.

By now, Song Jiang had been staying in his home village for a few months, and he decided he could not delay assuming office any longer. So he shed his mourning outfit, performed a few more days of service, and held a big feast to say goodbye to the village elders. The next day, his relatives held their own feast in his honor.

After all the feasting, Song Jiang prepared to head off to Chuzhou Prefecture. He left the family estate in the care of his brother Song Qing. Now, even though Song Qing also received an official appointment, he decided to stay home and return to civilian life so he could maintain the ancestral estate and altar. The brothers also distributed a large amount of swag to the villagers.

Song Jiang now returned to the capital to see his chieftains and to wrap up the business of distributing rewards to the army and discharging the soldiers who wanted to go home. By now, the other 25 remaining chieftains were also preparing to go their separate ways, with some ready to set off to assume their new posts, while others were busy moving their families to the capital.

As Song Jiang tied up loose ends and prepared to head off to his own post, he got a visit one day from Dai Zong the Magic Traveler. The two sat and chatted for a while, and then Dai Zong stood up and said, "His majesty has appointed me to be the prefect of Yanzhou (2,1). But I am going to resign that position and go to the Sacred Mountain Temple in Tai'an (4,1) Prefecture to live out my days as a Daoist priest. I would be most fortunate to be able to live out my life in tranquility."

"Brother, where did you get that idea?" Song Jiang asked in surprise.

"I had a dream that the Summoner to the Netherworld was calling me," Dai Zong said. "So I got this notion."

"Well, brother, you were the Magic Traveler in life, so you will surely become a spirit of the district after you die," Song Jiang said.

And so they parted. Dai Zong did as he planned, resigning his post and taking up residence in the Sacred Mountain Monastery in Tai'an (4,1) Prefecture. There, he burned incense and offered diligent

prayers to the emperor of heaven each day. A few months later, he was feeling fine, but one day, he gathered the other priests in the temple, bid them farewell, laughed, and died. Later, his spirit indeed manifested itself on numerous occasions at the temple, prompting the locals to worship him and set up a statue of him in the temple, using his original skeleton as the framework.

And this kicks off a sequence about the fates of all the remaining chieftains. So, let's cue the montage.

Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest and lone surviving Ruan brother, was appointed as commandant of a military district. But within a couple months of assuming office, his past caught up to him. Remember that when the Song forces sacked the rebels' palace, Ruan Xiaoqi had discovered the rebel emperor's bootleg imperial regalia and decided to put it on and parade around the place. It was all fun and games until two generals in the service of Tong Guan, the chancellor of military affairs, saw him and cursed him for what they thought was highly inappropriate behavior. He cursed them back, and they nearly came to blows. Ever since then, those two generals had been whispering to Tong Guan about that incident, saying how even though Ruan Xiaoqi was just having some fun in the moment by putting on the rebel's imperial robes, it showed that he will harbor ill intentions over time. Plus, they said, he has been assigned to a secluded military district where the locals are savages, so that's a perfect recipe for another rebellion.

So Tong Guan passed that along to the premier Cai Jing, who then passed it along to the emperor and convinced the emperor to issue a decree, taking back Ruan Xiaoqi's appointment. Of course, they were actually doing Ruan Xiaoqi a favor, since he never possessed the disposition for government service anyway. So he was secretly relieved. He moved back to Stone Tablet Village with his mother and resumed life as a fisherman, living to the age of 60.

When news about Ruan Xiaoqi losing his appointment made the rounds, it put another chieftain on notice. Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind was already contemplating his future after seeing Dai Zong the Magic Traveler give up his post. When he heard that Ruan Xiaoqi had lost his appointment, he got to thinking, "I was once the son-in-law of the rebel emperor Fang La. If the wicked officials catch wind of that in the future and start slandering me to the emperor, how can I not suffer humiliation? Why don't I take the initiative and resign now?"

So, Chai Jin claimed that he could not fulfill the demands of his new office because of ... umm ... recurring rheumatism. He gave up his post and returned to his home in Cangzhou (1,1) Prefecture, where, oh yeah, he was still rich. He passed his life in leisure and died one day without any illness.

When word of Chai Jin's resignation got around, another chieftain got to thinking. Li (3) Ying (4) the Striking Hawk had been in his post for about six months when he suddenly had to resign because he ... umm ... also had recurring rheumatism. Must be something in the water on Liangshan. In any case, he gave up his post and returned home to Lone Dragon Ridge alone with Du (4) Xing (4) the Demon Face, who used to be his steward before the Liangshan bandits invited slash kidnapped them both to join their gang. They lived out their lives in peace.

Guan Sheng the Great Saber was named commandant of the garrison in Daming Prefecture, which was a pretty sweet gig. He was good at his job and earned the respect of the troops and the local populace. But then one day, after overseeing military drills, he got drunk and fell off his horse while riding home. As a result, he took ill and died. And this is why friends don't let friends drink and ride.

Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs was appointed a commander of the imperial guards, and he drilled his men daily. Later, when the Song became embroiled in wars against the Jin kingdom to the north, Huyan Zhuo led an army into battle and died in the fighting.

Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard excelled as a garrison commandant, and later he helped the Song army achieve a victory against the Jin kingdom. He eventually rose to governor of a military district.

Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains returned to Qingzhou (1,1) Prefecture, where he had been a commander before, and where he was now a commander again.

Sun Li the Sick Yuchi, his younger brother Sun Xin, and Sun Xin's wife Gu Dasao all returned to their home in Dengzhou (1,1) Prefecture to assume their new offices. Kind of amazingly, this three-person family managed to survive the war, even though several other members of their original group did not.

One surviving member of that original group was Zou Run (4) the Single-Horned Dragon. His uncle Zou Yuan (1) had been killed in the Southern campaign, and Zou Run now turned down his official appointment and returned to living on Cloud-Climbing Mountain, where he had been an outlaw before.

Another chieftain who had lost an older brother in the war, Cai Qing (4) the Single Stem of Flower, returned to his home in Daming Prefecture with Guan Sheng the Great Saber. Remember that Cai Qing and his brother used to be jailers in the city. He now settled back down in the city as a civilian.

Mu Chun the Little Restrained had also lost his elder brother on the campaign. He now returned to their home in Jieyang (1,2) Town on the bank of the Sundown River as a law-abiding civilian.

Two other chieftains, Pei Xuan the Iron-faced Scribe and Yang Lin the Multicolored Leopard, decided to give up their positions and return to Horse-Watering Valley, minus the two chieftains who had originally lived there with Pei Xuan, as they had both been killed.

Jiang (3) Jing (4) the Divine Mathematician, having lost the other three members of his original four-men gang, decided to return to civilian life in his home in Tanzhou (2,1) Prefecture.

Zhu Wu the Divine Strategist, having lost his three brothers from their days on Shaohua (4,2) Mountain, joined up with Fan (2) Rui (4) the Demon King of Chaos, who had lost his two shield-bearing comrades from his original gang. The two of them took to the life of wandering Daoist priests, and they eventually joined up with Gongsun Sheng and dedicated the rest of their days to religious pursuits.

Ling Zhen the Sky-Quaking Thunder was appointed to the Imperial Artillery Bureau, where he continued to apply his remarkable gift of blowing stuff up.

And then there were the five chieftains who were kept in the capital by members of the imperial court before the Southern campaign. An Daoquan the Miracle Healer became a senior physician in the imperial hospital. Huangfu Duan the horse expert was put in charge of the imperial stables. Jin Dajian the jade carver had already been appointed an official at the imperial treasury, and he continued in that post. Xiao Rang the Sacred-Handed Scribe was named tutor in the residence of the premier Cai Jing. And Yue He the Iron Whistle remained in the palace of Prince Consort Wang, where he lived out his days in ease and contentment, earning his keep with his fine singing. See, it helps to have transferable skills beyond killing and pillaging.

So that closes the book on every chieftain except five: Song Jiang, Lu Junyi, Wu Yong the strategist, Hua Rong the archer, and Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. They were all appointed as governors, prefects, or prefectural commanders in different corners of the empire. And perhaps we could just leave it there and fade to black, leaving Song Jiang haunted by questions of whether amnesty was the right choice; leaving Lu Junyi to ponder the parting caution from Yan Qing the Prodigy; leaving Wu Yong to think about Chao Gai and the original group of seven heroes who robbed the birthday gift convoy, kickstarting the rise of Liangshan; leaving Hua Rong to live with his sister, who was now a widow after her husband Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt died in battle; and leaving Li Kui to strafe under the confines of his new post without the moderating influences of any of his former comrades.

We COULD leave it all there, but someone just could not. More accurately, four people could not leave it alone. These were the gang of four wicked officials who controlled the court: the premiere Cai Jing, the chancellor of military affairs Tong Guan, and the marshals Gao Qiu and Yang Jian (3).

One day, Gao Qiu and Yang Jian got together, and Gao Qiu said, “Song Jiang, Lu Junyi and the rest were our arch-enemies, but now they’ve become officials who have rendered great service and received high ranks and rewards from the court. They are commanding armies and civilians, while we ministers have become a laughingstock. As the old saying goes, ‘Gentlemen scorn the timid, heroes must be ruthless.’ ”

Yang Jian replied, “I have an idea, to take care of Lu Junyi first so as to cut off one of Song Jiang’s arms. Lu Junyi is a valiant warrior. If we moved against Song Jiang first, he will no doubt cause trouble when he finds out, and that won’t be good.”

“What’s your plan?” Gao Qiu asked.

“Well, first, we produce a few soldiers from Luzhou (2,1) Prefecture and have them go to the Council of Military Affairs to allege that Lu Junyi is raising an army in Luzhou (2,1) and storing grain in preparation for a revolt. Then their report will make its way to Premier Cai, and it will fool even him. And then, the premier will inform the emperor and ask for an imperial edict, summoning Lu Junyi to the capital ...”

[FADE OUT]

A little while later, two soldiers from Luzhou Prefecture showed up at the Council of Military Affairs, saying that Lu Junyi was recruiting an army and storing grain with the intention of rebelling, and that he was in constant contact with Song Jiang about the matter. And the Council of Military Affairs, of course, was run by Tong Guan, who was no fan of Song Jiang and company. So he quickly wrote up a report of the allegations and went to see Premier Cai. The two then conferred with Gao Qiu and Yang Jian, who were like, “What? These are shocking allegations!

The next day, the four of them, along with the two informants, went to see the emperor in private about this. The emperor, though, was skeptical.

“When Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were defeating the Liao and pacifying Fang La, they commanded 100,000 troops,” he said. “If they didn’t harbor thoughts of rebellion then, why would they do it now that they have exterminated the evil and returned to the path of the righteous? I haven’t mistreated them, so why would they turn against the court? There is something fishy about these allegations; it’s hard to put much faith in them.”

But Gao Qiu and Yang Jian said, “Your majesty talks of loyalty, but who knows what lies in the hearts of men? It must be that Lu Junyi feels his office is too low and is dissatisfied, thus he’s harboring thoughts of rebellion.”

“Then let’s summon him here, and I will question him about it and get the truth myself,” the emperor said.

But Cai Jing and Tong Guan said, “That Lu Junyi is a fearsome beast. Who knows what he’s thinking? If we alarm him, he will get suspicious, and that will make things awkward and it won’t be easy to catch him. So why not invite him to dinner, and in the course of conversation, your majesty can feel out his true intentions. If he seems loyal, then you don’t need to mention anything about the allegations. And the invitation will show him that you have not forgotten those who render great service.”

The emperor agreed, and an envoy was dispatched to summon Lu Junyi to the capital for an assignment. Upon receiving the edict, Lu Junyi immediately set off and returned to the capital with the envoy. After an uneventful journey, he arrived in the capital and the next day he went to the palace to await the start of the morning court session. There, he was greeted by the gang of four, who brought him in to see the emperor.

After Lu Junyi paid his respects, the emperor said, “I wanted to see you again. Are you comfortable in Luzhou (2,1) Prefecture?”

“Thanks to your majesty’s blessings, the army and the civilians are all peaceful,” Lu Junyi said.

The emperor then made some more chitchat, and then it was lunch time. The master of the imperial chefs announced that lunch for Lu Junyi was ready if the emperor wished him to dine. The emperor ordered the food be brought out, and Lu Junyi bowed to offer his thanks and then ate.

After lunch, the emperor said, "When you return to Luzhou, you must maintain the army diligently. We don't want anything to happen."

Lu Junyi kowtowed again to thank the emperor for his kindness, and for lunch, and then left the court and embarked on his journey back to Luzhou. Well, hmm, that was an ... odd ... summon. The emperor called me in all this way just to ask a couple questions, offer me lunch, and say good job, keep it up?

On the return journey, Lu Junyi started feeling a pain in his back and a general weakness throughout his body. Whatever this ailment was, it was bad enough that he couldn't ride a horse. So he took a boat instead. One night, they were approaching the Huai (2) River. Lu Junyi had a few cups to drink and then stepped out onto the prow of the boat for some fresh air. All of a sudden, there was a splash, and seconds later, Lu Junyi had disappeared below the waves. By the time his attendants pulled him from the river, he had long since drowned.

So, unbeknownst to everyone except the gang of four, the meal that Lu Junyi received at the palace was laced with mercury. The mercury reached not only his kidneys, but also his bones, and that's why he was feeling weak and achy. When he was standing on the prow of the boat, his legs were too weak to stand firmly, and in his inebriated state, he lost his balance and fell into the river to a watery grave. I guess even if he didn't drown, the mercury would have killed him sooner or later. If only he had listened to Yan Qing and retired into anonymity.

When this news got back to the gang of four, they huddled and then informed the emperor, saying, "Governor Lu fell into the water on the Huai River and drowned. We dare not keep this from your majesty. With Lu Junyi dead, we worry that Song Jiang might grow suspicious and cause trouble. Please send an envoy with an edict and imperial wine as a reward to reassure him."

The emperor wasn't so sure about this. I mean, you saw what happened to the last guy I offered refreshments to. But eventually, he was convinced by the gang of four.

Over in Chuzhou (3,1) Prefecture, it had been six months since Song Jiang took office as governor. He showered the army and the people with love, and the civilians in turn treated him as they would a parent, while the soldiers all revered him like a god. So all was going well. He even found a nice little tourist spot outside the south gate. It was a little marsh, with a tall beautiful mountain in the center and surrounded by waterways. The mountain was covered with pine and cypress trees. It was a small place, and yet it resembled Liangshan in so many ways, with its swelling peaks, winding paths, sheer cliffs, its stairways and terraces, and waterways everywhere. So Song Jiang spent many a happy day touring the place.

Then, one day, he got word that an envoy had arrived to bestow upon him a bottle of imperial wine. Song Jiang and his officials went to meet the envoy and escort him to the guest house, where he read the edict and presented the wine to Song Jiang. When Song Jiang offered the envoy a cup, the envoy declined, saying he never drank. Song Jiang then threw a feast for the envoy, who then returned to the capital, declining parting gifts from Song Jiang.

Over in Runzhou (4,1) Prefecture, Li Kui was currently chafing from the life of a commandant. He was always agitated and spent his days overindulging in drink with his men. Then one day, he got a letter from Song Jiang, inviting him to Chuzhou (3,1) Prefecture.

“My brother must have something important to tell me,” Li Kui thought. So he quickly boarded a boat with some attendants and headed to Chuzhou. There, he met Song Jiang, who told him, “Brother, ever since we all parted ways, I have been missing everyone. Professor Wu Yong is too far away, and I haven’t heard anything from brother Hua Rong. Only you are somewhat nearby, so I wanted to invite you here to discuss an important matter.”

“What is it, brother?” Li Kui asked.

“Let’s drink first and then talk,” Song Jiang said. He then led Li Kui into his private quarters, where a spread was already laid out. After they ate and drank for a while, Song Jiang said, “Brother, I have learned that the court is sending me a bottle of poisoned wine to kill me. If I die, what will you do?”

At that, Li Kui shouted, “Brother! Let’s rebel!”

“But our army is gone, and our brothers are scattered,” Song Jiang said. “How can we rebel?”

“I have 3,000 troops under my command, and you can mobilize all your forces here,” Li Kui said. “And throw in the civilians, and redouble efforts to recruit more troops. And then we’ll fight and return to Liangshan to live the high life! It’s better than taking abuse from those corrupt officials!”

“Slow down, brother,” Song Jiang cautioned. “Let’s talk this over.”

The next day, Li Kui took his leave, and Song Jiang saw him off at the pier. As he prepared to board his boat, Li Kui asked, “Brother, when will you revolt? I will bring my forces to help you.”

“Brother, don’t be angry with me,” Song Jiang said. “The imperial wine had already been delivered, and I already drank it. My death is imminent. My whole life has been all about loyalty and honor, and I would never practice deceit. Even though I am innocent, the court wants me dead. And yet, I would rather have the court wrong me than have me wrong the emperor.

“My only concern after death is that you might rebel and ruin Liangshan’s reputation for loyalty, honor, and delivering justice on heaven’s behalf. So I invited you here. The wine you drank last night was

drugged with a slow-acting poison. You will die when you get home. After you die, your spirit can come to the south gate of Chuzhou Prefecture. There is a little marsh there that looks so much like Liangshan. Our spirits can reunite there. I have decided that I will be buried there after I die.”

So yeah, Song Jiang had drunk the imperial wine a few days earlier, and soon started feeling a pain in his stomach. He got suspicious and inquired about the envoy, and his men reported back that the envoy was seen drinking at a guest house on the return trip. Song Jiang connected the dots.

“I have studied Confucianism since childhood, and when I grew up I learned how to be a minor official,” he thought to himself. “Unfortunately I got entangled in crime, but I never harbored any desire to do anything against my conscience. Yet today, his majesty listened to the words of the wicked and sent me poisoned wine. What have I done to deserve this? It doesn’t matter if I die, but Li Kui is the commandant in Runzhou Prefecture. If he finds out about the court’s actions, he will no doubt return to banditry and ruin the reputation of our entire band of brothers.”

And now, as Song Jiang revealed his deceit to Li Kui, his tears fell like rain. Li Kui also teared up, and then he said, “Damn it all! In life I was your servant, and in death I will be a minor ghost in your service as well.”

As he wept, Li Kui started sensing that his body was feeling heavy. The poison was starting to do its work. He now took his leave of Song Jiang, and sure enough, by the time he returned home, the effects of the poison had taken hold.

As he lay dying, Li Kui instructed his attendants, “After I die, you **MUST** take my coffin to the marsh outside the south gate of Chuzhou Prefecture and bury me alongside my brother.”

And with that, the Black Whirlwind expired. Per his dying words, his attendants carried his coffin to the designated marsh.

For his part, Song Jiang spent his last hours in grief after taking leave of Li Kui. He thought about Wu Yong and Hua Rong and lamented not getting a chance to see them. That night, he approached the end, and he told his attendants that they must bury him deep in the marsh outside the south gate. And then, he died.

The local officials honored Song Jiang's last wish and buried him in the marsh. A few days later, Li Kui's attendants arrived with his coffin, and they laid him to rest next to Song Jiang's grave.

When word of Song Jiang's death reached his younger brother Song Qing on the family estate back in Yuncheng County, Song Qing was laid up in bed with an illness and could not travel to Chuzhou Prefecture to oversee the funeral. Later, when he got word that Song Jiang had been buried in the marsh outside the city, Song Qing sent some men to go offer sacrifices and to make sure the grave was well-maintained.

Let's check in now on Wu Yong, the bandits' former chief strategist. He was also unhappy in his post and always thinking about the affectionate bond between himself and Song Jiang. Then one day, he started feeling depressed and uneasy. That night, he dreamt that he saw Song Jiang and Li Kui, and they both clutched his clothes and said, "Professor, we valued honor and loyalty and carried out justice on heaven's behalf. We have never been disloyal to his majesty. And yet, the court has sent us poisoned wine, leading to our unjust death. We are buried deep in the marsh outside the south gate of Chuzhou Prefecture. If you value our past bond, please come visit our graves."

Wu Yong was just about to ask for details when he startled awake. That dream brought him to tears and made him restless. The next day, he packed up and traveled to Chuzhou Prefecture alone. Upon arrival, he discovered that Song Jiang had indeed died, much to the lament of the local civilians.

Wu Yong now prepared some sacrificial items and went to the marsh outside the south gate. He found the graves and mourned his two comrades. Beating his hands on the grave mounds and weeping

bitterly, he addressed Song Jiang, "Your spirit is not yet gone, brother. Please hear my words! I was a village school teacher. First I followed Chao Gai, and then I met you, and you saved my life. We shared honors together for decades, all thanks to your virtue. Now you have died for our country and appeared to me in a dream. I have not yet repaid you for all your kindness, so I will take this dream as an omen and join you in the underworld."

Then, as he cried, he strung up a cord and prepared to hang himself. But just then, he heard footsteps approaching. He turned and was surprised to see someone dashing onto shore from a boat. This was none other than Hua Rong the archer, who was equally shocked to see Wu Yong.

"Brother, how did you find out that Brother Song was dead?" Wu Yong asked.

"Ever since we went our separate ways, I have been restless and thinking about our past brotherly affection," Hua Rong said. "I had a strange dream where Brother Song and Li Kui clutched my clothes and said, 'The court bestowed upon us poisoned wine and we are buried in the marsh outside Chuzhou Prefecture. If you haven't forsaken our old ties, then come pay our graves a visit.' So I left my family behind and rushed here."

"I had the same dream, exactly like yours," Wu Yong said. "That's why I came to see their graves. It's perfect that you are here. I cannot bear to be parted from Brother Song, so I was just about to hang myself and have my spirit reunite with him to show my loyal and honorable heart."

"Professor, if that is your intent, then I will accompany you and reunite with our brother, too," Hua Rong said.

"No brother," Wu Yong objected. "What I meant was that after I die, I was hoping you can bury me here as well. How can you kill yourself?"

But Hua Rong said, "It's impossible for me to forget Brother Song's honor and kindness. When we were on Liangshan, we were all capital offenders. We were most fortunate to escape death. And through all the battles, we made a name for ourselves. Thanks to the emperor, we received amnesty and

rendered great service in campaigns in the north and south. Our names are now known across the land. Since the court has started to be suspicious of us, they will no doubt look for any excuse to persecute us. If we end up being executed due to wicked officials' schemes, it would be too late for regrets. I would rather die with you today to ensure that I leave a good name and that my body gets buried."

"Brother, listen to me," Wu Song said. "I am single and have no family. There's no harm in my death. But you have a wife and a young son. What of them?"

"That's not a problem. I have left them enough to feed themselves. Besides, my wife's family will look after them," Hua Rong said.

Convinced that it was futile to try to talk Hua Rong out of it, Wu Yong relented. The two now wept bitterly, and then, they hanged themselves from a tree. When Hua Rong's attendants came looking after waiting for a long time, they discovered the two bodies and hurriedly reported their deaths to the local officials. They then prepared coffins and buried them alongside Song Jiang. The local people were moved by Song Jiang's virtue, loyalty, and honor, and so they built him a shrine where they offered sacrifices year-round, and where all their prayers were answered.

In the capital, the emperor had also been thinking about Song Jiang ever since he was convinced to send him a bottle of wine, but he had not gotten any news since then. Meanwhile, the corrupt officials continued to wield power at court and kept men of talent away.

Then one day, the emperor suddenly remembered someone: his old flame, the courtesan Li Shishi. So he and two eunuchs took the underground tunnel to her residence and rang the bell. Soon, Li Shishi rushed out to welcome him inside. Once he was seated, the emperor asked for the doors to be closed and for Li Shishi to sit by his side.

"I have been under the weather lately," he said. "The healer An Daoquan has been tending to me. It's been weeks since I came to see you. I've missed you, and it makes me so happy to see you today."

Li Shishi now prepared wine and food to treat the emperor. After a few cups, the emperor started getting a bit drowsy. All of a sudden, the candles and lamps started to flicker, and a cold wind blew through the room. The emperor looked up and saw someone dressed in yellow standing in front of him.

“Who are you?! How did you get in here?!” the emperor asked in alarm as he popped to his feet.

“I am Dai Zong the Magic Traveler, serving under Song Jiang of Liangshan,” the figure replied.

“What are you doing here?” the emperor asked.

“My brother Song Jiang is nearby and would like to invite your majesty on a little trip.”

“Where are we going?”

“A good place; a feast for your eyes.”

Hearing this, the emperor followed Dai Zong out and saw that a carriage had been prepared. Dai Zong helped him into the carriage and they set off. It seemed as though they were traveling through clouds and mist, while wind and rain whisked past. When they landed, the emperor saw that they were in a scenic place of water and hills, and the emperor could not get enough of the sights.

All around were misty waters and cloud-obscured heights. Neither the sun nor moon was visible, and the sky and water were of one color. The marsh was a riot of red smartweed and green reed leaves. Waterfowl played on stony beaches, mandarin ducks and drakes rested in pairs beside ponds of lotus. On the wooded slopes, frost had turned the leaves to 10,000 scales of a fiery dragon, while dew on the dykes glistened like the golden eyes of countless savage beasts. Gradually, a pale moon and a few scattered stars emerged in the night sky. It was autumn, and the breeze was chilly and the dew icy.

“What is this place?” the emperor asked. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll know when we get there,” Dai Zong replied, pointing to a pass on the top of a mountain.

So the emperor followed him and climbed the mountain, going through three tall mountain passes. When he arrived at the third pass, he saw 100-some people prostrated on the ground, all wearing golden armor and battle robes.

“Who are you all?” he asked in alarm.

The leader, a man wearing a brocade robe, golden armor, and phoenix wings helmet, stepped forth and said, “Your servant is Song Jiang of Liangshan.”

“But I appointed you to be the governor of Chuzhou Prefecture. What are you doing here?”

“Please follow us to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, and allow us to tell you about our unjust deaths.”

So the emperor followed them to the hall and sat down. As he looked back out at the hall, the emperor could see many people prostrating and enshrouded in mist. All this made him very uneasy.

Song Jiang now stepped forth and kneeled while weeping.

“Why are you crying?” the emperor asked.

“Even though your servants once resisted your divine troops, we have always been loyal and honorable and never harbored any stray thoughts. After we received your amnesty, we defeated the Liao in the north and captured Fang La in the South, losing most of our brothers in the process. You then appointed me to govern Chuzhou Prefecture, and since taking office, I have never squeezed a single coin from the army or the people. Heaven and earth may bear witness to my loyalty. Your majesty sent me poisoned wine, and I drank it, dying without regrets. But I was worried that Li Kui might bear a grudge and rebel, so I summoned him and killed him with poisoned wine as well. Then Wu Yong and Hua Rong came in the name of honor and hanged themselves by my grave. We four are buried in the marsh outside the south gate of Chuzhou. The locals took pity on us and built a shrine. My spirit and those of the others who had died have not departed. We are gathered here to tell you of our unwavering fidelity and beg you to determine the truth in the matter.”

The emperor was shocked. “I personally dispatched an envoy to give you imperial wine as a reward. Who switched it with poisoned wine?”

“Your majesty can find out by questioning the envoy,” Song Jiang said.

The emperor now asked what this place was, and Song Jiang told him that it was their former home on Liangshan.

“Since you are all dead, you should be getting reincarnated again,” the emperor said. “So why have you all gathered here instead?”

“The emperor of heaven took pity on us for our loyalty and honor,” Song Jiang said. “So he has made me the Deity of Liangshan Marsh. Since this is my domain, my chieftains have gathered here. We had no way to tell you our grievances, so we had Dai Zong invite you here so we may make our case.”

“Why didn’t you just appear to me in my palace?” the emperor asked.

“I am a spirit of the underworld, how can I appear amid imperial splendor? But today you left your palace, so we were able to invite you.”

The emperor now asked if he could stretch his legs, walk around, and see the sights, instead of sitting there and listening to spirits whine about their oh-so-unjust deaths. Song Jiang and company bowed again and the emperor now got up, walked out of the hall, turned, and saw the plaque saying, “Hall of Loyalty and Honor.”

Suddenly, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind appeared, holding his twin axes, shouting, “Your majesty. Your majesty. How could you listen to those four wicked officials’ slander and take our lives? Today is my chance for revenge!”

As he spoke, he sprinted toward the emperor with axes raised. The emperor fell into a panice, and in that moment, he suddenly startled awake. It was all a dream, but one so real that he was covered in cold sweat. As he rubbed his eyes, he could see that the candles were shining brightly, and his companion Li Shishi had not yet gone to bed.

“Where did I go just now?” he asked.

“You were lying on the side of the bed,” she told him.

He now recounted his dream to her, and she said, "The righteous become gods when they die. Could Song Jiang really be dead and thus appeared to you in a dream?"

"I will be sure to inquire about this. If it's true, then I must build him a temple and bestow posthumous titles on him."

"That's a good idea," she said. "It will show that your majesty does not forget your officials who have rendered service."

The emperor spent much of the night in lament. The next morning, he held. The gang of four, however, took off the moment court was adjourned because they were worried he might ask about Song Jiang. That left a few other officials, including Marshal Su (4), in attendance. Remember that Marshal Su had been one of Liangshan's key allies at court. The emperor now asked him if he had heard any news about Song Jiang recently.

At that, Marshal Su said, "I have not heard anything, but last night, I had a very strange dream."

The emperor was like, wait a second, me too! They then compared dreams and realized they both had the same one. The emperor now got even more suspicious, and asked Marshal Su to send a trusted man to go investigate.

The next day at court, the emperor saw the marshals Gao Qiu and Yang Jian in attendance and asked them if they had any news about Song Jiang. They just murmured that they had not heard anything, but that just made him more suspicious.

Soon, Marshal Su's man returned with news: Song Jiang had indeed died after drinking poisoned wine from the emperor. After his death, he was buried in the marsh outside the south gate of Chuzhou Prefecture. Wu Yong, Hua Rong, and Li Kui were also buried alongside him. The local people built them a shrine, where they offered sacrifices and had their prayers granted.

Marshal Su rushed into the palace to tell the emperor, who was much aggrieved. The next day at court, he flew into a rage in front of all the officials, scolding Gao Qiu and Yang Jian. The two fell to their knees and begged forgiveness. Meanwhile, Premier Cai and Chancellor Tong Guan stepped up and said, "Life and death are preordained. We had not yet received official notice from the local authorities, so we did not dare to report it to you as fact before we could ascertain the truth. The document from Chuzhou just arrived last night, and we were planning on informing your majesty today and looking into it."

Alas, despite everything, despite his dream, despite the facts that Marshal Su had gathered, and despite the gang of four's dubious track record, the emperor was once again taken in by their words. He relented and just let Gao Qiu and Yang Jian off with a tongue-lashing. Then, he ordered that the envoy who delivered the wine be tracked down, but soon found out that guy had died on the way back from delivering the wine, which was, umm, very convenient?

The next day, Marshal Su went to see the emperor and told him about how Song Jiang's spirit was granting wishes left and right. Hearing this, the emperor decreed that Song Jiang's little brother Song Qing should inherit his rank and title. But by now, Song Qing's rheumatism was so bad that he couldn't handle the responsibilities of office, or at least that's what he said in his thanks-but-no-thanks letter to the emperor. So instead, the emperor gave him 100,000 strings of coins and a ton of farm land, and the guarantee that if he were to have a son, that son would be given a government office. Later on, Song Qing indeed had a son, and that young man aced the imperial exam and rose to the rank of secretary scholar, which is kind of your cliché Chinese feel-good story.

Also at Marshal Su's behest, the emperor conferred on Song Jiang the posthumous title of the Loyal, Chivalrous and Efficacious Duke, and signed a check for money to build a temple to his honor on Liangshan. The main building displayed statues of Song Jiang and the other chieftains, and the emperor personally wrote the words for the name plaque that said Loyalty Temple. Song Jiang's spirit frequently manifested itself in the area, prompting the civilians to continue offering sacrifices to him in exchange for

having their wishes granted. Song Jiang's spirit also manifested itself around the marsh where he was buried, and the people there also built a temple to honor him and his brothers. The incense continued to burn in these temples for years and decades and centuries, as generation after generation worshipped the heroes of Liangshan.

And THAT brings us to the end of the Water Margin. ... No, seriously, that's the end. And if you're feeling like, wait, THAT'S how this ends? No good triumphing over evil? No payback against the wicked officials? The villains ... won? Well, yeah.

So I'm sure you have lots of thoughts about the novel and the way things panned out. I do, too. So next time, I'm going to do a wrap-up episode, look back on the novel, share some of my thoughts, answer some listener questions, and oh yeah, tell you what I'm doing next. That episode is probably coming out in a couple weeks, so if you have any questions that you would like for me to answer in that episode, send them to me as soon as possible at john@chineselore.com. I'll see you next time. Thank you so much for listening!