

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 91.

Last time, the Liangshan bandits marched on Daming Prefecture, intent on rescuing the magnate Lu Junyi and their chieftain Shi Xiu, who were locked up in the city's dungeon. The city's overseer, Governor Liang, sent out his top commanders Li (3) Cheng (2) and Wen (2) Da (2), but they were quickly routed in their first two battles against the bandits. As we rejoin the narrative, Wen Da had just taken his turn getting his butt whopped, and all he could do was scramble for a way out of the melee. He met up with his comrade Li Cheng, combined what remained of their forces, and ran back into the city. Governor Liang was stunned by this resounding defeat, so he ordered the gates shut tight and they hunkered down inside, while the bandits set up camp right outside the east gate and prepared to lay siege to the city.

Governor Liang now assembled his officials and asked them for ideas. The commander Li Cheng said, "The outlaws are at the gates and the situation is dire. If we delay, the city will fall for sure. Your lordship should dispatch a trusted man to rush a letter to the capital and inform your father-in-law, Premiere Cai, so that he may inform the court and mobilize crack troops to help us. Second, dispatch urgent letters to nearby prefectures and order them to come at once to provide reinforcements. Third, order civilians to join the city's defenses. Prepare logs and boulders, arrows and crossbows, lime bottles and molten metal. We must be vigilant day and night. Only thus can we avoid any slip-ups."

Governor Liang agreed and dispatched an officer to the capital that night. He also sent several riders off to nearby prefectures, bearing urgent requests for aid. Meanwhile, the local prefect organized brigades of civilians to join the city's defenses.

Outside the city, Song Jiang ordered the Liangshan forces to set up camp on the east, west, and north sides of the city, leaving only the south gate without any troops. Each day, he would lead his army and attack one of the gates. At the same time, he sent word back to Liangshan to ask for more provisions, as he was determined to stay as long as necessary to sack the city and rescue Lu Junyi and Shi

Xiu. Each day, the forces inside the city would come out and give battle, but they were defeated time and again.

While this was going on, the officer bearing Governor Liang's message to the premiere arrived in the capital. Premiere Cai was stunned by the news, and the officer filled him in on the details regarding Lu Junyi's case and how the Liangshan bandits had surrounded the city and were invincible. Premiere Cai told the officer to go get some rest and that he would take care of it.

That very day, Premiere Cai summoned the Chancellor of Military Affairs. This chancellor's name was Tong (2) Guan (3). When he and the three marshals who answered to him arrived, Premiere Cai brought them up to speed and asked for suggestions. All the officials, however, were silent and looking quite intimidated. So yeah, everybody was earning their paycheck on this day.

Just then, a man stepped out from behind the infantry marshal. His name was Xuan (1) Zan (4), and he was a commander of the palace guards. He had a ... umm ... less-than-handsome appearance. His face was the color of the bottom of a wok. His nostrils flared upward. He had curly hair and a red beard. He was a big man and wielded a steel saber with uncommon skills. He once bested some barbarian general in an archery contest, impressing a prince of the royal house so much that the prince married him to his daughter, so everybody called Xuan Zan the Ugly Prince Consort. Unfortunately, the princess was less than thrilled with being married to a guy with a face that merited that nickname, and she was so revolted that she soon died.

And as if it weren't bad enough for Xuan Zan that he was so ugly that it literally killed his wife, her death landed him on the royal family's blacklist, and he was passed over for promotions. So, he was languishing as a commander of the guards. And the aforementioned Chancellor of Military Affairs, Tong Guan, was a good-for-nothing sycophant who treated Xuan Zan with contempt.

As Xuan Zan stood there, watching all his superiors look at each other in dumb silence, he couldn't take it anymore and finally stepped up and said to Premiere Cai, "I have an acquaintance from my home

village. He is a descendant of the legendary Guan Yu from the Three Kingdoms period. His name is Guan Sheng, and he looks exactly like his famous forefather. He also wields a Green Dragon Saber, and everyone calls him Guan Yu the Great Saber. Right now his talent is being wasted as a lowly patrol officer in Pudong (3,1). He has studied military tactics since his youth, is well-versed in combat, and has unrivaled valor. If you can invite him here with a show of respect and gifts, and give him command of an army, he will be able to cleanse the bandits' lair and kill them all to protect the state and the people. He awaits only your command."

So we have yet another Three Kingdoms reference, and if you listened to my Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast, you would know that Guan Yu was an awesome warrior who came to be worshipped as a god of war and a symbol of honor, courage, and martial prowess. And from the way Xuan Zan was describing his descendant, this Guan Sheng sounded like Guan Yu reborn. Premiere Cai was delighted that SOMEBODY here actually had an idea, so he made Xuan Zan his emissary and sent him with a summon to invite Guan Sheng to the capital.

Xuan Zan set off right away with a few riders. Within a day, they arrived at the headquarters of the Pudong patrol. At that moment, Guan Sheng was sitting in his office with a friend, acting like a real Renaissance man and discussing the rise and fall of dynasties past. When he heard that an emissary had arrived from the capital, he rushed out with his friend and greeted Xuan Zan. They then went into the main hall and sat down.

"My friend, I have not seen you in a long time. What brings you here?" Guan Sheng asked Xuan Zan.

"The Liangshan bandits are besieging Daming Prefecture. I told Premiere Cai that you possess the strategies to bring peace to the realm and the skills to vanquish enemy generals and quell their armies. By imperial decree, and on orders of the premiere, I bring you these gifts of money, satin, and a fine saddle, and request that you set forth. You must not refuse, brother. Please pack and depart at once for the capital."

Guan Sheng was delighted by this news. He then introduced Xuan Zan to his friend, whose name was Hao (3) Siwen (1,2).

“This is my sworn brother,” Guan Sheng said of Hao Siwen. “His mother dreamed that the spirit of the Wood Dog of Well entered her womb shortly before she became pregnant with him. So everyone calls him the Wood Dog of Well. He is skilled in every type of weapon. Since I have been summoned by the premiere, he can come with us and serve the state together.”

So a quick word on this Hao Siwen’s nickname, the Wood Dog of Well. The well is a Chinese astrological sign, and it is symbolized by the dog, which in turn represents the element of wood. Anyway, Xuan Zan was delighted to have more company on this campaign, so Guan Sheng made arrangements for his family, and then gathered up his stuff and left with Hao Siwen and Xuan Zan that very night.

Once they arrived in the capital, they went to see Premiere Cai. Premiere Cai took one look at Guan Sheng and was immediately impressed. He was tall and stout, with a long beard, long eyebrows that swept across his temple, eyes that curved upward like those of a phoenix, a face like a date, and ruby red lips.

“How old are you, general?” Premiere Cai asked.

“32,” was Guan Sheng’s answer.

“The Liangshan bandits are besieging Daming Prefecture. What ideas do you have for lifting the siege?” the premier asked.

Guan Sheng replied, “I have long heard that those bandits have been occupying a swamp and causing disturbances. But now that they have left their lair, they are asking to be destroyed. It would be a waste of manpower to send a relief force to Daming. Instead, we should send tens of thousands of troops to sack Liangshan first, and then turn around and capture the bandit leaders. That way, they would be under siege from front and rear.”

Premiere Cai was quite impressed. He immediately ordered 15,000 troops to be mobilized. Hao Siwen was to lead the vanguard, Xuan Zan would oversee the rear, and Guan Sheng would be the commander. The army prepared quickly and soon set out.

Meanwhile, back at Daming Prefecture, Song Jiang and company had been camped outside the city for days but had been unable to break through its defenses. Inside the city, the commanders Li Cheng and Wen Da were too scared to come out to fight, and the general Suo Chao the Impatient Vanguard was still recovering from the arrow wound he suffered in the last battle. So the two sides were pretty much at a stalemate. This troubled Song Jiang, as he and his men had been away from Liangshan for quite a while now.

One night, he was sitting in his tent, perusing his divine scrolls by candlelight. Suddenly, a thought flashed across his mind: He had been laying siege to Daming for quite a while now, and yet there is no sign of a relief army from the government. What's more, Dai Zong the Magic Traveler had gone back to check on Liangshan, and his return was now overdue. This thought made Song Jiang uneasy.

Just then, the strategist Wu Yong dropped by and said, "We have surrounded the city for a long time, and yet they have not gotten any reinforcements, nor have the troops inside the city come out to fight. We saw three riders gallop out of the city a while back. They must have been bringing word to the capital. That Governor Liang's father-in-law, Premiere Cai, would surely have dispatched troops with good commanders. If they go attack our base on Liangshan instead of coming here, what would we do? Brother, we must guard against that possibility. We should have our men pack up, but not all leave at once.

As they were talking, Dai Zong returned and confirmed their worst fears: "Premiere Cai has dispatched the general Guan Sheng at the head of an army, and they are making straight for Liangshan,"

he told them. "The chieftains at the base cannot agree on how to proceed, so they are asking you to return at once to save the base."

"Even so, we must not leave in a hurry," Wu Yong said. "Tonight, tell the infantry to pull out first, but leave two cavalry forces to wait in ambush by Flying Tiger Ravine. When the enemy discovers that we are falling back, they will no doubt give chase. If we are not prepared, our troops will fall into disarray."

Song Jiang agreed, and immediately sent Hua Rong the archer at the head of 500 riders to wait on the left side of Flying Tiger Ravine, while Lin Chong the Panther Head took 500 riders and camped out on the right side. Huan Zhuo the Twin Staffs was sent to stake out a spot about three or four miles outside the city, along with 25 riders and the artillery specialist Ling (2) Zhen (4) the Heaven-shaking Thunder. If they see a pursuing army come out of the city, they were to fire a cannon shot as a signal to spring the trap.

All this done, the front column then pulled out quietly. They stashed away their banners and kept their drums silent, and slowly retreated. The infantry then followed in the middle of the night. It wasn't until about 9 a.m. the next morning that the whole army had pulled out.

As the last of the Liangshan forces departed, their movements were noticed by the sentries atop the city wall. They hurriedly reported to Governor Liang, and he immediately consulted his top commanders Li Cheng and Wen Da.

"A relief force from the capital must have gone to attack Liangshan," Wen Da said. "These rogues are afraid of losing their lair, so they have rushed off. We should use this opportunity to pursue and attack; we would capture Song Jiang for sure."

He had not even finished speaking when a letter from the capital had arrived, asking the city's troops to attack the bandits if they pull out. Governor Liang immediately ordered his commanders to lead an army and chase down the bandits.

Soon, this pursuing army could see Song Jiang's troops in the distance. As soon as the bandits saw their pursuers, they started running for their lives. Li Cheng and Wen Da spurred on their men, but no sooner had they entered Flying Tiger Ravine did they hear the sound of cannons from behind. Startled, the two commanders reined in their horses and looked around. They suddenly found themselves surrounded by enemy banners and the sound of war drums. They were just about to retreat when the cavalry ambush led by the chieftains Hua Rong and Lin Chong charged out and set them to flight. As they were running, they also ran smack dab into the chieftain Huyan Zhuo, who gave them another beating. By the time they scampered back to the city, Li Cheng and Wen Da and their troops were in total disarray. They rushed inside, shut the gates, and did not dare to come out again.

Having made a successful retreat, Song Jiang and his army rushed back toward Liangshan. As they approached the marsh, their path was cut off by enemy forces led by Xuan Zan the Ugly Prince Consort. So Song Jiang told his men to pitch camp while he dispatched a messenger to sneak around the enemy along some backroads and swim across the water to tell the chieftains on Liangshan to prepare for a coordinated attack.

One of the chieftains holding down the fort was Zhang Heng the Boat Flame. He was overseeing one of the naval camps. When he got news that Song Jiang was back, he said to his younger brother Zhang Shun, the White Streak in the Waves, "We haven't rendered any service since we came here. It's such a drag watching others boast about their abilities. Right now, that enemy general Guan Sheng is attacking our base. Why don't the two of us go raid the enemy camp and capture Guan Sheng. Now THAT would make us look good in front of others."

But Zhang Shun disagreed. "Brother," he said, "we only have some naval forces under our command. It's not enough. Your plan would just make us the butt of jokes."

“That attitude is gonna get us nowhere fast!” Zhang Heng snapped. “If you don’t want to go, then fine! I’ll go by myself tonight!”

Zhang Shun tried time and again to talk his brother out of it, but Zhang Heng refused to listen. That night, he took about 50 small boats, each carrying about five people, all wearing light armor and armed with bamboo spears and short daggers. As the moon cast its faint glow on cold dew, the boats silently coasted across the water.

Around 11 p.m., Zhang Heng and his 300 men set foot on land. They moved toward Guan Sheng’s camp, using the thick reeds to shield their movement. At the edge of the camp, they quietly moved aside the perimeter barriers and dashed straight for the center of the camp. There, they saw Guan Sheng sitting in the main tent, reading by candlelight while stroking his long beard, completely unaware of what’s transpiring.

Secretly delighted, Zhang Heng hoisted his spear and rushed into the tent. But just then, a gong sounded, followed by the roar of thousands of troops, making the earth shake and the heavens tremble. Zhang Heng was so startled that he turned and ran, dragging his spear behind him. But it was too late. Troops sprang out from all around. Zhang Heng and his men were like fish out of water, and soon they were all apprehended.

So, as it turned out, the moment Zhang Heng’s boats touched down on shore, Guan Sheng’s sentries had spotted them. When they brought word of this to their commander, Guan Sheng simply smiled and sent out a few orders to his troops. And sure enough, Zhang Heng and his men walked right into the trap.

As he looked upon his foes, now all bound and kneeling on the ground, Guan Sheng laughed and said, “You ludicrous two-bit crooks! How dare you try to sneak up on me?!” He then had Zhang Heng thrown into a prisoner cart while the others were all locked up. Once he had captured Song Jiang, Guan Sheng would take them all to the capital.



Word of this development soon made its way across the marsh, and Zhang Heng's younger brother Zhang Shun rushed off to his fellow naval chieftains, the three Ruan brothers, to tell them the bad news. As soon as he heard this, the youngest Ruan brother, Ruan Xiaoqi, jumped up and shouted, "We sworn brothers share life and death together and help each other whenever one is in danger. And you are his brother by blood. How could you have let him go alone and get captured? If you won't go rescue him, then the three of us will go."

"But I do not dare to move rashly without orders," Zhang Shun explained.

"By the time we get orders, your brother would be lying in pieces!" Ruan Xiaoqi shot back. His two older brothers also agreed. Zhang Shun couldn't convince them otherwise, so all four of them set out around 1 a.m. with their naval forces on 100-some boats.

Over at Guan Sheng's camp, the sentries saw another enemy fleet approaching and hurriedly reported to him. Guan Sheng chuckled and said, "These ignorant bandits are of no concern." He then summoned an officer and whispered some instructions to him.

Over at the water's edge, as soon as the Liangshan forces touched down on land, the three Ruan brothers led the charge toward the enemy camp, with Zhang Shun bringing up the rear. But when they stormed into the camp, they saw not a single soul. Recognizing a trap, the three Ruan brothers turned to fall back, but just then, a gong sounded, and eight squadrons of enemy forces appeared, surrounding them.

Seeing that the operation had gone south, Zhang Shun, who was still outside the camp, dove into the water and swam away. The three Ruan brothers fought their way out to the water's edge. But before they could jump in, a barrage of hooks on ropes flew at them and ensnared Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest brother. The other two Ruan brothers were more fortunate, as they managed to escape, thanks to a

dogged fight from reinforcements led by Li Jun the River Dragon and the Tong (2) brothers. Ruan Xiaoqi, however, was captured and put into a prisoner cart.

When the other two Ruan brothers and Zhang Shun fled back to Liangshan, they sent word of their debacle up to the stronghold. Liu Tang the Red-haired Devil quickly sent Zhang Shun to row across the marsh and go to Song Jiang's camp to let him know. Song Jiang consulted with Wu Yong, who suggested that they face off against Guan Sheng's forces first and see how it goes.

Just as they were speaking, they heard the sound of drums outside. Turns out it was one of Guan Sheng's officers, Xuan Zan the Ugly Prince Consort. He was there with an army, challenging for battle. Song Jiang led his men outside to face him. They saw Xuan Zan sitting atop his horse under his banner, demanding someone come fight him. Song Jiang asked which chieftain would answer the call. Hua Rong the archer immediately galloped out with spear in hand, and Xuan Zan hoisted his saber to meet him.

They traded blows for 10 bouts, and then Hua Rong feigned a thrust and rode off. Xuan Zan gave chase, but Hua Rong was up to his old tricks. He latched his spear and took out his bow and arrow, and suddenly turned around and let fly a shot. Xuan Zan heard the twang of the bowstring and saw the arrow coming. He raised his saber and with loud clang, the arrow glanced off the side of the blade.

Hua Rong now took out a second arrow and let fly again, aiming straight for Xuan Zan's heart. Xuan Zan quickly ducked, and the arrow flew past him. Now, even though he had avoided two shots, Xuan Zan could tell that Hua Rong was a standout marksman, so he did not dare to keep pressing his luck. He turned and rode back toward his own lines. But as he did so, Hua Rong also turned around and came after him. Taking aim again, Hua Rong let fly a third shot, and this one clanged off of the deflector in the middle of Xuan Zan's back. Xuan Zan was rattled and quickly rode into his own lines and sent word to Guan Sheng that the bandits were no ordinary lot.

Guan Sheng immediately mounted his horse, which was a tall steed the color of red charcoal. If you are familiar with the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, you'd know that this was the same color as the famous Red Hare Horse ridden by Guan Sheng's supposed ancestor Guan Yu. Guan Sheng now donned his armor and rode out to the front lines.

Song Jiang and Wu Yong were quite impressed with Guan Sheng's appearance, and Wu Yong turned and said to his men, "That general really lives up to his reputation!" But that remark riled up Lin Chong the Panther Head, who scoffed. "Ever since we came to Liangshan, we have fought 70-some engagements, and we have never brought shame upon ourselves. Strategist, why do you put ourselves down?!"

As he spoke, Lin Chong galloped out to take on Guan Sheng. Guan Sheng, however, roared, "Two-bit swamprats! How dare you turn against the imperial court?! Tell Song Jiang to come face me!"

Song Jiang called off Lin Chong and rode out to the front of the lines. He bowed from his saddle and said, "I am Song Jiang, a humble clerk from Yuncheng. My respects and apologies to you, general."

"You were a lowly magisterial clerk; how dare you rebel against the court?!" Guan Sheng asked.

"The court is enshrouded in darkness, and corrupt officials hold sway and horde power. They push out conscientious officials and harm the civilians. We are carrying out justice on heaven's behalf, nothing more."

Guan Sheng, however, was not impressed. "The divine army has arrived, and yet you still resist! Your shrewd words cannot fool me! Surrender now, or you will be destroyed"

From the bandits' lines, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt had heard enough. He galloped out swinging his wolf-toothed mace and made straight for Guan Sheng. At the same time, Lin Chong the Panther Head, fearing that Qin Ming would steal his thunder, also rode out. Guan Yu showed no fear and raised his big saber to take them both on. The three warriors circled and traded blows.

But soon, a gong sounded from Liangshan's lines, signaling for their guys to fall back. Lin Chong and Qin Ming rode back to their lines and asked Song Jiang, "We were just about to capture that knave. Why did you call us back?"

"Brothers," Song Jiang explained, "we carry ourselves with honor and loyalty. It is not our way to punch down. Even if we captured him in battle by outnumbering him, he would not deem it a fair fight. And people would laugh at us. In my view, Guan Sheng is a valiant warrior, a loyal official, and his ancestor is a god. If we can get him to join us, I would be willing to yield the leadership to him."

Lin Chong and Qin Ming were nonplussed by Song Jiang's remarks, but the order had been given, so both sides called it a day.

When he returned to camp, Guan Sheng thought to himself, "I was about to lose to those two warriors, but then Song Jiang called them off. What's he doing?"

Perplexed by that question, he had his men bring the prisoners Zhang Heng and Ruan Xiaoqi to his tent, and he asked them, "Song Jiang is just a lowly magisterial clerk from Yuncheng County. Why do you all respect him so much?"

Ruan Xiaoqi replied, "My brother Song Jiang is known throughout Shandong and Hebei Province as the Timely Rain. But I don't expect a dishonorable man like you to understand!"

Taken aback, Guan Sheng lowered his head and said nothing. He just told his men to put the prisoners back in their carts. That night, he sat alone and restless in his tent. He then strolled around his camp. The moon was shining brightly on the glistening frost on the ground. Reflecting upon this scene, Guan Sheng couldn't help but let out a few sighs.

Just then, a sentry came and said, "There is a bearded general here all by himself, asking to see you."

"Did you ask who he was?"

"He refused to say. He was unarmed and just said that he wanted to see the commander."

Guan Sheng told the sentry to bring the visitor to him. Momentarily, the man arrived at his tent and bowed to pay his respects. Guan Sheng looked at him under the candlelight and felt that he might have seen this guy somewhere before. So he asked the visitor for his name.

“Please ask your men to leave us,” the visitor said.

To see who this visitor was, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Guan Sheng and company lead an army to Daming Prefecture. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!