

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 100.

So, first of all, wow! One hundred episodes! This is as good a time as any to pause and say thank you again to all my listeners for all your support for this podcast over the past two-plus years, or even longer, in the case of those of you who have been following my work since the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Without you, I would not be investing the amount of time it takes to do this for seven years. And I definitely would not be feeling so excited about this undertaking that I plan to keep doing this after the Water Margin Podcast is over.

Speaking of which, if my comment at the end of the last episode about the narrative coming full circle had you thinking that this podcast is about to end, well, stick around and listen. Here we go.

Last time, our bandits successfully wrapped up their dual campaigns against neighboring towns to settle the leadership question. In the end, Song Jiang sacked his town first, so he was now the undisputed leader of Liangshan, which was what everybody else wanted all along anyway, and the only guy disputing it was Song Jiang himself. So we could've saved ourselves a lot of toil and spared the neighboring towns some unnecessary bloodshed if Song Jiang had just done the darn thing that everyone wanted him to do in the first place. But I digress.

As the now 108 chieftains gathered in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, Song Jiang said to them, "Ever since I came here after causing a ruckus in Jiangzhou Prefecture, thanks to the support of all you heroes, I became the leader. Now, we have gathered 108 chieftains, which delights me greatly. Ever since Brother Chao Gai returned to heaven, whenever we went on campaign, we all came back safely" — and by "we all" I'm assuming he means just the chieftains, not the lackeys, many of whom definitely died on those campaigns. Anyway, he continued, "This is heaven's blessing, not the doing of mortals. Even those who were captured or wounded turned out ok. And now, the 108 of us are gathered here. This is a true rarity in all of history.

“We cannot atone for the lives lost in previous conflicts, but I wish to hold a huge mass to thank heaven and earth for their kindness. First, this is to pray for protection and happiness for my brothers. Second, it’s to pray that the court will soon bestow its kindness upon us and forgive our capital offenses, so we may dedicate our strength and our bodies to repaying the country, so that our names will carry on after our deaths. Third, it’s to pray that Brother Chao’s spirit will soon become a god in heaven, so that we may meet again in another life. And finally, we should pray that the slain innocents — whether they died by violence, fire, or drowning — be allowed to cross over into heaven. That is my desire; what do you all think?”

All the chieftains agreed that this was a great idea, and Wu Yong the strategist suggested that the priest Gongsun Sheng should oversee the mass, and that they should invite renowned priests from all corners of the realm and purchase all the necessary sacrificial items. So, they scheduled this mass for the 15th day of the fourth month of the year, and it would last for seven days.

Everybody then snapped to, sparing no expenses. As the ceremony drew near, the Hall of Loyalty and Honor was decked out. Four banners were hung in front of the hall, three high altars were constructed, and idols of saints and deities were set up. On the two sides stood the Spirits of the 28 Constellations and the 12 Watches, and idols of guardian generals were set up outside the hall.

Once everything was ready, 49 Daoists priests, including Gongsun Sheng, were invited to begin the service. It was a clear, beautiful night, with calm breezes and a clear moon. Song Jiang and Lu Junyi led the way in offering incense, while Wu Yong and all the other chieftains followed. Gongsun Sheng presided over the ceremony and issued the required texts and documents.

The 49 priests were to perform their rituals in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor three times a day for the next seven days, and then they would disperse. Song Jiang wanted to pray to heaven for a sign that their

devotion was acknowledged, so Gongsun Sheng burned special prayers written on paper three times a day.

On the night of the seventh day, around midnight, Gongsun Sheng was standing on the top level of the altar, the other priests were on the second tier, Song Jiang and the other chieftains were on the third tier, and all the lackeys were crowded at the foot of the altar. All were praying to heaven for a sign.

Suddenly, a loud sound resembling the tearing of silk echoed across the night sky as the heavens seemed to literally open up and shoot out blinding rays of light. Amid the light, a fireball came crashing down. It landed on the altar and rolled all the way down to the base and then went into the earth to the south. And then, the seam in the sky closed up, and all was normal again.

Song Jiang ordered men to dig up the soil where the fireball had entered the earth. They had not dug deep when they struck a stone tablet, covered on both sides with inscriptions in some kind of mystical script. Umm, I guess there's your sign.

Song Jiang now ordered his men to scatter the ashes of the burnt prayers. At dawn, once the priests had breakfast, he paid them with valuables, and then got down to examining the tablet. It was covered with squiggly scripts that resembled tadpoles. As it so happened, one of the priests present, a Priest He (2), was well-versed in the occult, and he told Song Jiang, "I have a set of books at home handed down from my ancestors that can be used to decipher divine texts. So I recognize this tadpole script and can translate it."

Song Jiang was delighted and immediately set him to work. After examining the tablet for a long while, Priest He said, "This tablet has all you heroes' names carved on it. On one side it says, "Delivering Justice on Heaven's Behalf." On the other side, it says, "Complete Loyalty and Honor." At the top are

diagrams of the Great and Small Dippers, and below that are all your names. If you don't mind, I can read them out from the top."

"Thank you, master, for your guidance," Song Jiang said. "This must be preordained. We would benefit greatly from your insights. If heaven has any words of reproach, please do not conceal them. Reveal them all to us; don't leave out anything."

Song Jiang then summoned the chieftain Xiao (1) Rang (4) the Sacred-Handed Scribe, the guy with really good penmanship, and told him to write down the priest's translation on yellow paper. Priest He now said, "The first 36 lines are the names of the stars of Heavenly Spirits. The next 72 lines are the names of the stars of Earthly Fiends. And they are all listed with your names."

After looking at the tablet for another long while, Priest He started reading off the names, and Xiao Rang wrote it all down. I'm not going to read all 108 names here, but here are the first 10 names, just to give you an idea: At the top was Song Jiang the Timely Rain, the Leader Star. Next was Lu Junyi the Jade Qilin, the Strength Star. After that came Wu Yong the Wizard, the Knowledge Star, then Gongsun Sheng the Dragon in the Clouds, the Leisure Star. No. 5 was Guan Sheng the Great Saber, the Brave Star. No. 6 was Lin Chong the Panther Head, the Majestic Star. No. 7 was Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, the Fierce Star. No. 8 was Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, the Prestige Star. No. 9 was Hua Rong the archer, the Hero Star. And No. 10 was Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind, the Noble Star.

So, I have received a number of questions from listeners during the past couple years about which chieftain would triumph against which other chieftain in a theoretical matchup, kind of like debating which superhero can defeat which other superhero. Well, here's the authoritative pecking order. If you want to see the whole list, I have posted the entire thing on the podcast website, [outlawsofthemarsh.com](http://outlawsofthemarsh.com). There is a link to it under the Episodes & More tab in the navigation. There is also a link to that list in the transcript for this episode. So go check it out. I'm sure this list has been the source of endless debates and disagreements over the centuries, but what I want to know is how Song

Jiang's little brother Song Qing, who has done absolutely zilch in this novel except oversee banquets, somehow not only made it onto the list, but was ranked ahead of 32 other chieftains. I guess heaven also places an outsized emphasis on a good party.

Now, in the context of the story, this of course harkens back to the opening episode, where 108 demons were unwittingly unleashed upon the earth, so everything that's happened has been preordained. But from another perspective, this just seems so ... convenient. I mean, the star rankings just so happen to mirror your existing leadership structure perfectly? And how did we end up with exactly 108 chieftains? I mean, first, you had to completely discount Chao Gai, who was not on this tablet. And even if you said you're only counting the live ones, the criteria for who gets to be a chieftain and who doesn't seem rather opaque and arbitrary. I mean, the last chieftain to join was a vet, and he didn't even do anything. Somebody just recommended him to Song Jiang, and Song Jiang was like, ok, you're a chieftain now. At the same time, we had somebody like that unfortunate bandit Han (2) Bolong (2,2) in episode 95. He was just waiting for 15 minutes to open up on Song Jiang's calendar so he could go kiss the ring and be officially inducted into the gang, but he was unceremoniously whacked by Li Kui before that could happen. But I have to imagine there are other guys like him on Liangshan. Who's to say why they should be destined for lackeyhood, when they probably could best some of the low-level chieftains in a fight? Even if you discount Song Qing being named a chieftain as a case of acceptable nepotism, what about all the other guys who made chieftain without much fighting skills? We have a vet, a tailor, a horse thief, a scribe, and an engraver, just to name a few. If I were a lackey on Liangshan, I would be demanding some transparency on the guidelines for promotion and chieftainhood. And finally, are we just maxxed out at 108 chieftains, and nobody else is allowed to join? How does that make sense?

Anyway, I'm done ranting. Once the translated list was read aloud, everyone was stunned. Song Jiang now said to all the chieftains, "Who would've thought that a lowly clerk like me is a Heavenly Spirit, and

that all of you are also spirits. Heaven has shown us that it was right for us to gather in honor. Now, we have reached our full numbers, and our rankings have been determined by heaven, separated into an upper and lower tier, the Heavenly Spirits and the Earthly Fiends. Everyone's place is spelled out, so let's all be content with our rank. Do not squabble in defiance of heaven."

Oh sure, that's easy for you to say, Mr. No. 1 on this list of mysterious origins. But anyway, everyone agreed and declared, "This is the intent of heaven and earth, the natural order of things. Who would dare to go against it?"

Song Jiang now gave Priest He 50 taels of gold, and the priests all gathered up their stuff and left. Meanwhile, Song Jiang discussed with Wu Yong and Zhu Wu the Divine Strategist, and decided that they would erect a new plaque in the hall, with giant characters saying "The Hall of Loyalty and Honor." They would also change the signage at the Unity Pavilion. And they also carried out a bunch of other home-improvement projects, like building stockades outside each of their three mountain passes, erecting a new terrace, setting up a nice big hall for Chao Gai's altar, and setting up new quarters all over the place and assigning chieftains to them.

They also released a new duty roster, which I will not go into in detail. But here are a few highlights:

- Song Jiang and Lu Junyi were listed as co-No. 1s, though of course everybody understood that Song Jiang was always 1A to Lu Junyi's 1B.
- Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng shared the role of strategists, while Zhu Wu was named associate strategist.
- They designated five chieftains as the Five Tiger Generals. These were: Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Lin Chong the Panther Head, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, and Dong Ping the General of Double Spears. So, if you were keen on rankings, you can consider these five to be Liangshan's best warriors.

- They also designated eight other chieftains as Cavalry Tiger Vanguard. So you can consider them the B-team. And these were: Hua Rong the archer, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, Yang Zhi the Blue-Faced Beast, Suo (3) Chao the Impatient Vanguard, Zhang Qing the Featheress Arrow, Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, Shi (3) Jin (4) the Nine Tattoo Dragons, and Mu (4) Hong (2) the Unrestrained.
- The guy that I think drew the shortest straw was probably Li (3) Yun (2) the Green-Eyed Tiger. He was supposedly a pretty good fighter when we met him in episode 64, but now he was put in charge of ... building quarters, something that he had shown no propensity for. The dude was a constable in his former life. What does he know about building houses?
- Oh and of course, Song Jiang's little brother Song Qing was once again put in charge of banquets. Good for him.

Once everybody got their new assignments, they all celebrated in their usual manner — getting drunk off their butts. Everybody then tended to their duties diligently. On an auspicious day, Song Jiang lit a pot of incense, and beat drums to summon all the chieftains to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor. There, he said to them, “Things are different now, so I have a few words to say. Since our gathering is a meeting of Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends, we must swear an oath to heaven that we would bear no deceit and stand by each other in life and death, through thick and thin, and unite to protect the country and the people.”

All the chieftains were delighted by those words, so everyone offered incense, and then they all kneeled while Song Jiang spoke the oath out loud:

“I, Song Jiang, was but a lowly clerk, lacking knowledge and abilities. Yet, thanks to the sheltering of heaven and earth and the light of the sun and the moon, I have gathered with my brothers here on Liangshan, totaling 108, in accordance with the destiny of heaven and the will of the people. From now

on, if anyone harbors unvirtuous intentions and offends our code of honor, we pray that heaven and earth shall scourge him, that spirits and men shall destroy him, and that he will never again be reincarnated in human form and remain forever sunken in the depths. We pray that we shall unite our loyal and honorable hearts to render service to the country, deliver justice on heaven's behalf, and protect the realm and its people. Heaven examine us, and by your luminance, give us a reply."

At that, all the chieftains declared as one their shared desire to come together in every lifetime. They then took a blood oath and proceeded to get drunk in celebration again.

From that day forth, the chieftains often went down the mountain, sometimes with troops, and sometimes with just a few other chieftains. They let ordinary merchants and travelers pass unmolested. But if they came across an official, they emptied his coffers ... and killed him and his entire family. All the sizable loot would be taken back to the base, where it was stored away for communal use. Any minor loot would just be divided among the bandits who obtained it.

Also, within a 100-mile radius of their base, if they heard about some rich household that was oppressing the poor, our heroes would show up at their doorstep and seize all their wealth. It didn't matter if you lived near or far, if you were a petty rich man who picked on the common people, you were going to get a visit from our heroes sooner or later, and this happened over a thousand times, and no one could resist the bandits. So our heroes were doing great on the robbing-from-the-rich thing, but less so on the giving-to-the-poor part. But in any case, if you lived on Liangshan, life was good, and so, our heroes lived happily ever after. THE. END.

Except ... it wasn't the end. Well, in one later version of the novel, which spanned only 70 chapters, this was indeed where the story stopped. The editor of that version concocted some crazy ending where, after the bandits got the divine tablet, Lu Junyi witnessed everyone being executed, and then he woke



up to find that it was all a dream. But in the original 100-chapter version of the novel, the story continues from here. So, will Song Jiang and company get their happily-ever-after? Let's find out.

While his chieftains made a habit of going off the mountain to forcibly redistribute wealth from the rich to themselves, Song Jiang did not leave the base at all. Soon, the summer had passed, and it was now early fall, and the Double Ninth Festival, the ninth day of the ninth month, was approaching. Song Jiang told his little brother to do his duty and set up a big feast, and he invited all his chieftains to join him in admiring the blooming chrysanthemums. He even named the event the Chrysanthemum Feast. All the chieftains, even if they were off on business trips to distant locales, were called back to partake.

On the day of the feast, there were mountains of meat and oceans of wine. First, they distributed food and drink to the lackeys, and sent them all back to their own camps to make merry. Then, the chieftains gathered in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor. The hall was decked out in chrysanthemums, and the chieftains sat according to their order and toasted each other. At the front of the hall, musicians played, and the hall was filled with the sounds of drums, gongs, lutes, chatter, and raucous laughter as the chieftains drank to their hearts' content. The chieftain Ma (3) Lin (2) the Iron Flute Deity played the flute, while Yue He the Iron Whistle sang and Yan Qing the Prodigy strummed the zither.

The party was going great, and Song Jiang was getting wasted. In the spur of the moment, he asked for brush, ink, and paper, and he composed a poem called "A River of Blossoms." After he finished, he handed it to Yue He the Iron Whistle and told him to set it to music and sing it out loud, which Yue He promptly did. And this was how the song went:

Welcome to the Double Ninth,  
With newly distilled good wine,  
We gaze at the blue waters, red bills,  
Yellow reeds, and dark bamboo.

The grey in my hair is ever increasing,  
But a yellow chrysanthemum is tucked over one ear.  
Let us savor our friendship,  
More precious than gold or jade.  
We've controlled the savage foe and defended our borders.  
Our orders are wise, our discipline tight.  
We want only to repel the barbarian invaders,  
Defend the people and our country.  
Constantly we burn with loyal ardor,  
though wicked officials are blind to our exploits.  
May his majesty soon grant us amnesty;  
Only then will our hearts be content.

When Yue He got to that last line, however, somebody was anything but content. Wu Song the Pilgrim stood up and shouted, "Amnesty today; amnesty tomorrow! All this talk about amnesty is making all of us lose heart!"

That was followed by Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, who gnashed his teeth and roared, "Amnesty?! Amnesty?! Who the hell wants frickin' amnesty?!"

And with that he kicked over a table and smashed it to pieces.

"How dare this dark knave be so rude?!" Song Jiang shouted angrily. "Men, take him outside and execute him at once!"

At that, everybody kneeled and pleaded for Li Kui, telling Song Jiang, "That knave is just acting up while he's drunk. Please forgive him."

Song Jiang relented, told everyone to get up, and told the guards to just lock up Li Kui for the time being. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and a few guards came forth and asked Li Kui very nicely to please follow them to jail.

“What? You think I’ll put up a fight?!” Li Kui grumbled. “Even if my brother were to kill me or cut me to pieces, I would not harbor any resentment toward him. He is the only person I respect; no one else.”

And then, he followed the guards to jail.

Li Kui’s words made Song Jiang snap out of his drunkenness, and now, his anger was replaced by sadness. Wu Yong the strategist consoled him, saying, “Brother, at a banquet like this, everyone will get drunk. He’s an oaf and offended you in a drunken stupor. Don’t let it get to you. Just enjoy the day with our brothers.”

But Song Jiang said, “When I was in Jiangzhou Prefecture, I got drunk and wrote a seditious poem, and he came to my rescue. Today, I wrote another poem, and it almost cost him his life! Thank goodness our brothers intervened. The bond between him and me is stronger than all others; we are like flesh-and-blood brothers. That’s why I’m sad.”

And then, Song Jiang called Wu Song the Pilgrim over and said, “Brother, you know how the world works. I am advocating for amnesty so that we may return to the proper path and serve the country. How could you say that’s making everyone lose heart?”

But Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk chimed in, “Right now most of the officials at court are wicked, and they’ve got the emperor fooled. They are as black as my cassock. Who can wash the imperial court clean? An amnesty isn’t going to do anything. Let’s just bid each other goodbye and go our separate ways.”

Song Jiang, though, said to them, “Brothers, listen to me: His majesty is sage and wise; it’s just that he’s being kept in the dark by wicked officials and is thus temporarily misled. The day will come when the clouds shall part, and he will know that we are delivering justice on heaven’s behalf and not disturbing

innocent civilians. He will pardon our crimes and offer us amnesty. Then, we can work together to repay the country and leave an everlasting good name. Won't that be great? It's because of that and no other reason that I pine for an amnesty."

That explanation somehow satisfied everybody, and they all told Song Jiang how he was so much more far-sighted than them. And then they drank heartily and returned to their own camps after the banquet. Personally, I'm skeptical that that little speech would win over no-nonsense guys like Wu Song and Lu Zhishen, who, let's face it, were absolutely right about the state of the court.

Anyway, the next day, everyone went to check up on Li Kui in jail, and he was still asleep. They woke him and told him, "Yesterday you got drunk and cursed Brother Song. Today, he's going to execute you."

"I won't even dare curse him in my dreams," Li Kui said. "If he wants to execute me, then just let him."

Everyone now brought him to see Song Jiang and asked for forgiveness. Song Jiang barked at Li Kui, "If all the troops under my command acted as rudely as you did, would we not have chaos? On account of all our brothers, I will take a raincheck on your head. If you commit another offense, I will not spare you."

Li Kui muttered his apologies and left, and everyone else also disbanded. Things went on uneventfully for the next few months, and soon, the year's end was drawing near, and winter was here. One day, as the snow fell, word came that the bandits had captured a government traveling party headed to the capital and were awaiting orders on what to do with them.

"Don't bound them; just invite them here, nicely," Song Jiang told his men.

Soon, the travelers were brought before him. It was two government officials and about eight or nine lantern makers, along with five carts of stuff. Their leader told Song Jiang that they were from Caizhou (4,1) Prefecture, and that they were on their way to the capital to make their annual delivery of lanterns as ordered.

Song Jiang treated them to wine and food, and asked to see the lanterns they had brought. The craftsmen set up the lanterns, and it was a dazzling display, totaling 81 lanterns, reaching from the ceiling to the floor.

“I originally wanted to keep all of these for myself, but then you might suffer for it, and that would not be ok,” Song Jiang told the travelers. “So just leave this one set, and you can take the rest to complete your errand. Here are 20 taels of silver for your trouble.”

This was way better than the travelers could’ve hoped for. They thanked Song Jiang and left. Song Jiang then instructed his men to hang the one set of lanterns by Chao Gai’s altar. The next day, he said to the chieftains, “I was born in Shandong Province, but I’ve never been to the capital. I’ve heard that his majesty is holding huge lantern displays to celebrate the Lantern Festival with the people. They’ve been making lanterns since the start of winter and just now finished. I would like to go with a few brothers to have a look.”

Uhh, you DO remember what happened the last time you guys crashed a Lantern Festival, right? To see how this year’s celebration will go, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, see which chieftains Song Jiang brings with him to the capital. So join us next time.

Thanks for listening!