

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 97.

Last time, the Liangshan bandits returned to Zeng Family Village looking to avenge the death of their former leader Chao Gai. They mostly had the upper hand in the first two engagements, including killing the eldest of the Zeng family's five sons.

As we pick up the story, the Zeng family's youngest son, Zeng Sheng (1), had demanded that they go avenge his brother. So the family's arms instructor Shi (3) Wengong (2,1) led an army out to challenge for battle. He rode out on the fine horse that they had seized from Liangshan previously, which was the cause of all this kerfuffle. Shi Wengong rode out to the front of the lines to challenge for battle. On the bandits' side, the chieftain Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt wanted to claim the honor of slaying their nemesis, so he galloped out to take on Shi Wengong.

The two warriors raised their weapons and exchanged blows. Now, as we have seen repeatedly in the novel, Qin Ming was one of Liangshan's fiercest fighters. But this time, he met his match. After 20 bouts, he started to falter, so he turned and rode back toward his own lines. But Shi Wengong chased after him, and speared him in the back of the thigh, sending him tumbling off his horse. Four chieftains from Liangshan quickly charged out to occupy Shi Wengong while the lackeys rescued Qin Ming, but the Zeng family forces charged and won the day, riding the momentum from their arms instructor's victory.

The bandit forces fell back about 3 miles and pitched camp. Song Jiang had Qin Ming sent back to Liangshan on a cart to recuperate. He and Wu Yong also decided to send along word that four chieftains from the base should come join them: Guan Sheng the Great Saber; Xu (2) Ning (2) the Golden Lancer, the guy who wielded the barbed spear; and Wei (4) Dingguo (4,2) and Shan (4) Tinggui (2,4), the generals of fire and water.

That night, the sky was clear, the moon was bright, and the winds were still. In the Zeng family's main camp, the arms instructor Shi Wengong said to the youngest son Zeng Sheng, "We have wounded the bandits' generals; they must be intimidated. We should take this opportunity to raid their camp."

So Zeng Sheng summoned forces from three other camps, led by two of his brothers and the assistant arms instructor Su (1) Ding (4). The five of them joined forces and set out around 9 p.m. They removed the bells from their horses and put their soldiers in light armor so as to move in silence.

As they approached the enemy's position, they met no resistance, so they charged straight into the bandits' main camp ... and found no one.

Realizing it was a trap, the raiding party tried to retreat, but just then, three bandit forces charged out, led by Hua Rong the archer and the two hunter brothers, Xie Zhen the Two-Headed Serpent and Xie Bao the Twin-Tailed Scorpion.

As the two sides scrummed in the dark, Zeng Suo (3), the Zeng family's third son, was suddenly skewered by Xie Zhen's trident and fell dead off his horse. And then, the bandits started a fire and brought in even more reinforcements. After the two sides fought for half the night, the Zeng family's forces fell back, and the arms instructor Shi Wengong had to fight his way out to safety.

When the Zeng family's patriarch, Zeng the Elder, saw his troops limp back minus yet another son, he became even more troubled. The next day, he told Shi Wengong to write a letter to the bandits, offering a truce. By now, Shi Wengong was also quite intimidated by the Liangshan forces, so he wrote a letter and sent a messenger to deliver it to Song Jiang. Song Jiang summoned the courier into his camp and read the letter. It said:

"The leader of the Zeng Family Village humbly bows before you, General Song. Previously, one of my sons offended you in a moment of boldness. When Lord Chao led his forces here, we should have

submitted then. Alas, without cause, one of my lowly subordinates fired a cheap shot and compounded our offense. Even if I had a hundred mouths, I cannot explain it. It was never our intent.

Now, that dog of a son is dead, and I am sending this emissary to discuss a truce. If you call off your attack, we will return all the horses that we seized from you, plus lots of valuables to reward your army, so that we may both avoid further losses. To that end, I offer this letter; please consider it carefully.”

When Song Jiang finished reading, he flew into a rage and ripped the letter to shreds.

“You killed my brother! How can I just let that slide?! My wish is to cleanse your village!” he scowled.

This fury sent the courier down on his hands and knees, trembling in fear. Wu Yong the strategist quickly intervened and said to Song Jiang, “Brother, you’re in error. We came to fight because they had wronged us. But now, the Zeng family has sent a messenger to sue for peace. How can we lose our honor because of a momentary rage?”

Wu Yong then asked Song Jiang to write a reply letter, tipped the relieved messenger with 10 taels of silver, and sent him on his way. When the messenger got back, Zeng the Elder and Shi Wengong read the bandits’ reply, and it said:

“Song Jiang, the leader of Liangshan, offers this personal reply to the leader of the Zeng Family Village. A country governs the realm through trust; a warrior pacifies the borders through valor; a man is nothing without courtesy; and an unjust treasure must not be taken. There had never been any bad blood between Liangshan and the Zeng Family Village, and we each minded our own territory. Yet, you spurred countless retaliations with your momentary act of villainy. If you want peace, then you must return the horses that you seized from us on two occasions, as well as that horse thief Yu (4) Baosi (3,4). You also must reward our troops with valuables. Prove your sincerity through your generosity. If you change your mind, then we would have to take *other* measures.”

The language in that letter left both Zeng the Elder and Shi Wengong feeling uneasy. The next day, the Zeng family sent another messenger to the bandits' camp, suggesting that they each exchange a hostage to ensure that both sides abide by a truce. Song Jiang didn't want to do it, but Wu Yong said sure thing.

He then summoned five chieftains: Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum; Li Kui the Black Whirlwind; Fan (2) Rui (4) the Demon King of Chaos; plus Li (2) Gun (3) and Xiang (4) Chong (1), the two shield-bearers who were handy with throwing knives and darts. Wu Yong told these five that they were going over to the Zeng family's camp to serve as guarantors of the peace.

Now, if you thought that sending the Black Whirlwind to the enemy to guarantee peace was a strange thing to do, you would be right. As the five prepared to depart, Wu Yong whispered some instructions to Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum. The hostages then set out. Meanwhile, the four new chieftains that Song Jiang had summoned from Liangshan arrived in camp.

Over at the Zeng Family Village, Shi Qian and his fellow hostages arrived and went to see Zeng the Elder to tell them that they were there to ensure Liangshan abided by the truce. But Shi Wengong was skeptical.

"They sent five guys here; this must be a trick," he said.

When he heard that, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind flew into a rage and wanted to beat Shi Wengong. Zeng the Elder quickly intervened, and Shi Qian said, "This Li Kui may be a brute, but he is Brother Song Jiang's confidant. That's why he was sent; please do not be suspicious."

At this point, Zeng the Elder really, really wanted to restore the peace, so he ignored Shi Wengong's warnings. He treated the hostages to wine and then set up quarters for them in the nearby monastery, where they were watched by 500 soldiers.

Next, the Zeng family sent their youngest son Zeng Sheng, along with the horse thief Yu (4) Baosi (3,4), to the bandits' camp to serve as hostages on that end. The two men arrived in the bandits' camp with the horses they had seized from the bandits, along with a cartload of treasures.

Upon inspecting the loot, Song Jiang said, "These horses were all from the second time you stole from us. There is still that White Jade Lion that Glows in the Night, which you stole from us the first time. Where is it?"

Zeng Sheng replied, "That is my teacher Shi Wengong's ride, so we could not bring it."

"Hurry up and write a letter to tell them to bring that horse to us immediately," Song Jiang demanded.

So Zeng Sheng wrote the letter and sent a man back to his family's camp to ask for the horse. But that's when the peace talks hit a snag.

"We can give them back any horse except this one," Shi Wengong said after he read the letter.

Really man? You're gonna trash the peace negotiations because of one horse? Well, apparently so. Several rounds of letters went back and forth between the two sides, and Song Jiang insisted on having that horse returned. Eventually, Shi Wengong sent a messenger to say, "If you insist on having my horse, then have your army fall back, and I'll return it."

Song Jiang and Wu Yong were debating how to respond when suddenly, scouts reported that two government armies from Qingzhou (1,1) and Lingzhou (2,1) Prefectures were approaching.

"If those knaves hear about this, they will no doubt change their tune," Song Jiang said. So he immediately dispatched six chieftains at the head of two armies to repel the incoming enemy reinforcements. Then, he summoned the horse thief Yu Baosi, put his mind at ease with some kind words, treated him generously, and told him, "If you are able to help us, then you, too, can be a chieftain on Liangshan, and we swear that we will forget all the bad blood from your theft of our horses. If you refuse, however ... well, the Zeng Family Village is about to fall any day now, so you decide."

A little while later, the Zeng family arms instructor Shi Wengong saw Yu Baosi come back into his camp. Yu Baosi told him, "I escaped from the bandits' camp. Zeng Sheng and I went to Song Jiang's main camp and discovered the truth: Right now Song Jiang's only intent is to get his hands on your horse. He has no desire for peace. If you return the horse to him, he will turn on you. But he also got word that relief forces are coming from Qingzhou and Lingzhou Prefectures, so he's in a panic. This is the perfect opportunity for a strategic attack."

Shi Wengong brought Yu Baosi to see Zeng the Elder, and Yu Baosi repeated what he said earlier and advised that they should raid Song Jiang's camp since he had no desire for peace.

"But my son Zeng Shegn is still in his camp," Zeng the Elder said. "If we turn on them, he would no doubt be killed first."

"We will rescue him when we breach the bandits' camp," Shi Wengong said. "Tonight, order all our camps to mobilize all their forces. We will hit Song Jiang's main camp first. Once we have cut off the head of the snake, the rest of the bandits are useless. Then, we can come back and kill the five hostages."

Zeng the Elder agreed, so he sent word to the assistant arms instructor Su Ding and his two other sons, telling them to join the raid that night.

That night, Shi Wengong, Su Ding, and the two remaining sons of the Zeng family mobilized all their forces and set out. The moon was enshrouded in clouds, and the stars were dim. Shi Wengong and his fellow arms instructor Su Ding took the lead, while the two Zeng brothers brought up the rear, as their raiding party traveled in silence.

When they arrived outside Song Jiang's camp, they took one look and went uh oh. The camp gates were wide open, and they did not see a single soul inside. Not seeing any movement at all, the raiding party figured they were walking into a trap, so they quickly turned around.

Just then, they heard the sound of gongs, drums, and explosives echoing from inside Zeng Family Village. This was the doing of Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum, one of the hostages that Liangshan had sent over to the Zengs. As it turned out, Yu Baosi, the horse thief, chose to side with the bandits, and so he brought the Zeng family some false intel and then briefed the Liangshan hostages on what was going down that night. As part of the plan, Shi Qian had climbed to the top of the monastery's bell tower and started ringing the bell as the signal.

Immediately, cannon blasts rang out by the east and west entrances to the village, followed by earth-shattering battle cries from seemingly countless men, charging into the village. Inside the monastery, the other four hostages, led by Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, started cutting down guards left and right as they slashed their way out.

While all this was happening, the raiding party that consisted of all the Zeng family's troops, rushed back to their respective camps, but they were way too late to do any good. Recognizing that all was lost, Zeng the Elder had already hung himself in his own camp. His second son Zeng Mi (4) rushed toward the west camp, but was run through by the broadsword of the chieftain Zhu Tong, the Lord of the Beautiful Beard. The fourth son, Zeng Kui (2), tried to make it to the east camp, but was trampled to death in the chaos.

The assistant arms instructor Su Ding managed to make it out of the north entrance, but soon ran into countless concealed pits. At the same time, from behind came Lu Zhishe the Flowery Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim. From ahead came Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast and Shi (3) Jin (4) the Nine Tattooed Dragons, and they killed Su Ding with a barrage of arrows. Some of Su Ding's men were fleeing behind him, and wave after wave fell into the concealed pits, resulting in countless casualties.

So all the Zeng family's key players were dead, except for the arms instructor Shi Wengong. He was riding on that fine horse that was the cause of all this bloodshed, so he was able to charge out of the

west entrance and gallop away into the wilderness. But it was pitch black and he did not know what direction he was running in.

He rode on for about six or seven miles when suddenly, he heard the sound of gongs from behind some woods. In the blink of an eye, 500 soldiers had charged out. At their head, a warrior raised a wooden staff and swung at his horse's legs, but that horse saw it and leaped over the head of its assailant. Shi Wengong kept riding on, but now cold dark mist was descending all around him. As the novel put it, it was as if the spirit of Chao Gai was casting a net over him.

Shi Wengong tried to retrace his steps, but just then, he was cut off by Yan Qing the Prodigy, and from the side came Lu Junyi the Jade Qilin. Remember that Lu Junyi had been sent here by Wu Yong to, umm, lie in wait and provide backup when needed. It was all a ploy by Wu Yong to keep him out of battle so he would not have a chance to capture Shi Wengong, which would give him the right to claim the leadership of Liangshan. And yet, here he was, facing Liangshan's nemesis.

"Scum! Where are you going?!" Lu Junyi shouted as he attacked. He only needed one thrust of his broadsword to stab Shi Wengong on the thigh and send him off his horse. He now tied up Shi Wengong and headed toward the Zeng Family Village, while Yan Qing brought the horse to the main camp.

As soon as Song Jiang saw Lu Junyi arrive with his prisoner, he was both ecstatic and furious. Ecstatic because Lu Junyi had done exactly what Song Jiang had hoped — capture Liangshan's mortal foe so that he could now claim the leadership. But furious because the sight of said mortal foe made Song Jiang's anger flare. Song Jiang ordered his men to execute the last Zeng brother, Zeng Sheng, who had come over as a hostage during the peace negotiations. As for the rest of the Zeng family's household, they were naturally all executed without exception. The bandits then cleaned out the family's wealth and grain, and loaded them all on carts to be taken back to Liangshan to reward the chieftains and the troops.



Meanwhile, word came that the two incoming government relief forces had been easily repelled by the bandit armies sent to stop them, so it was just good news piled upon good news for the outlaws. They now threw Shi Wengong into a prisoner's cart and headed back to Liangshan with all their loot. On the way, they caused no trouble at all for any of the towns or villages that they passed by.

When they got back to Liangshan, everyone assembled in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor. First, they paid their respects at the altar of their former leader, Chao Gai. Next, Song Jiang ordered Xiao (1) Rang (4) the Sacred-Handed Scholar to write a memorial for Chao Gai. All the chieftains donned mourning clothes, and they performed a memorial service that culminated with cutting open Shi Wengong's chest and placing his heart on Chao Gai's altar as a sacrifice.

Bloody vengeance thus attained, Song Jiang now sat down in the hall to discuss the next important piece of business: selecting the next leader of Liangshan.

"Brother, you should be the leader, and Mr. Lu the second, and all the other brothers should retain their old position," Wu Yong suggested.

But Song Jiang said, "Brother Chao Gai's dying words were, 'Whoever catches Shi Wengong, no matter who it is, shall be the leader of Liangshan.' Today, Mr. Lu captured that scoundrel alive and brought him here to be sacrificed to Brother Chao so as to avenge his death. So Mr. Lu should be the leader. There is no need for any discussion."

But Lu Junyi quickly declined, saying, "My virtue is shallow and my talent sparse. How would I dare to assume the leadership?! Even if I were given the last spot in the pecking order, it would still be too much."

"No, I'm not being modest," a modest Song Jiang pushed back. "There are three areas where I am not Mr. Lu's equal. First, I am short, dark, ugly and untalented, while Mr. Lu is handsome, stout, and exudes an aristocratic air. Second, I was a lowly magisterial clerk. I fled here to escape punishment for my

crimes, and it was only because my brothers did not spurn me that I temporarily occupied the leadership. Mr. Lu comes from a wealthy family and has long carried the reputation of being a hero. Even though he encountered some dangers, heaven has been protecting him. Third, I have neither the knowledge to pacify the realm nor the martial skills to command the respect of others. I neither have the strength to strangle a chicken, nor have I rendered the slightest bit of service. Mr. Lu has the strength to fend off tens of thousands and is well-versed in the classics. Who in the realm does not respect him when they hear his name? Brother, only someone with your talent and virtue can be Liangshan's leader. And then, when we submit to the imperial court and render service to the state, it will earn us rank and wealth and bring honor to all our brothers. My heart is set; please do not decline."

But Lu Junyi now kneeled and said, "Brother, don't waste your breath. I would rather die than to follow this command."

Wu Yong the strategist chimed in and told Song Jiang, "Brother, everyone would fall in line with you as the leader and Mr. Lu as the second. If you keep yielding your position time and again, it might make everyone lose heart."

As he spoke those words, Wu Yong glanced over at the assembly of chieftains. Right on cue, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind piped up and shouted at Song Jiang, "Back in Jiangzhou Prefecture, I risked my life and followed you here. We've let you have your way in everything. I'm not afraid of heaven itself! What the hell are you doing, trying to give the leadership away time and again?! Piss me off and I'll start a ruckus, and everyone will leave!"

Wu Song the Pilgrim also caught Wu Yong's meaning and followed up, yelling, "Brother Song! There are many under your command who were government officials. They yield only to you. How can they be willing to submit to anyone else?!"

Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil was next. "When my group of seven first came to Liangshan, we already intended to make you our leader. Why do you want to let someone else lead?!"

Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk joined the outrage as well, roaring, "Brother, if you keep trying to yield the leadership to someone else, then we're all gonna leave!"

Faced with this, umm, spontaneous threat of insurrection, Song Jiang tried to defuse the situation.

"No need for you all to say anything," he told the disgruntled chieftains. "I have an idea. We can see what heaven's will is, and then decide."

"Please enlighten us," Wu Yong said.

"Right now, our base lacks money and grain," Song Jiang explained. "To the east of Liangshan, there are two prefectural towns. One is Dongping (1,2), and the other is Dongchang (1,1). We have never disturbed their civilians. If we go ask them to 'lend' us grain, the officials will of course refuse. Why don't Mr. Lu and I draw lots, and we will each attack one of the towns. Whoever sacks their target first shall be the leader of Liangshan. How about that?"

"That's a good idea," Wu Yong said. "We will obey heaven's will."

Lu Junyi still tried to convince Song Jiang to just take the damn command chair, but he did not get his way. Instead, Song Jiang burned incense and prayed to heaven, and then he and Lu Junyi drew lots to see who would attack which town. As it turned out, Song Jiang would attack Dongping, while Lu Junyi would attack Dongchang.

That day, they threw a feast to celebrate. During the banquet, Song Jiang sent out orders to mobilize two armies. Each army would have 10,000 cavalry and infantry, led by 25 chieftains, as well naval support led by three naval chieftains. The rest of the chieftains, plus anyone who was wounded in the siege on the Zeng Family Village, were ordered to stay on Liangshan to defend the base.

Song Jiang's army featured names like Lin Chong the Panther Head, Hua Rong the archer, Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil, Shi Jin the Nine Tattoo Dragons, and the three Ruan brothers leading the naval support. Lu Junyi, meanwhile, was assigned the assistance of both the strategist Wu Yong and the priest

Gongsun Sheng, as well as Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, Lei Heng the Winged Tiger, Suo Chao the Impatient Vanguard, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast and so on, along with the naval chieftains Li Jun the River Dragon and the two Tong (2) brothers.

Now, while each army had some impressive names, one can't help but notice that Song Jiang gave Lu Junyi both Liangshan's strategist and its resident wizard. And pound for pound, I would say that Lu Junyi also had a stronger starting lineup of generals. It was pretty obvious that Song Jiang was stacking the deck in Lu Junyi's favor.

And so, the two armies set out on the first day of the third month of the year. The weather was warm, the winds calm, the grass green, and the sands soft — the perfect time of the year to inflict some out-of-nowhere divine justice on the citizenry of two towns whose only offense was that they happened to be in Liangshan's blast radius during a leadership squabble among the bandits. And it wasn't even two bandits fighting to claim the leadership and deciding to use these towns to settle the argument. It was two guys trying their darndest to refuse the leadership, and yet somehow that's leading to these two towns needing to be smacked down. I guess justice works in mysterious ways.

To see how this honorable campaign on heaven's behalf will unfold, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, one of the chieftains decides to look up an old flame. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!