

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 101.

Last time, our heroes discovered a tablet that fell from the sky, telling them that they were all incarnations of heavenly and earthly spirits. They went, cool, and went back to their particular interpretation of delivering justice on heaven's behalf. Then, Song Jiang said that he wanted to go to the capital to partake in the annual Lantern Festival celebrations.

He decided that only eight people including himself would get to go. He and Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind would go together. Shi Jin the Nine-Tattooed Dragons and Mu Hong the Unrestrained would go together, disguised as merchants. Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim would travel as a pair since they were both ... umm ... men of religion. Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard and Liu Tang the Red-Haired Devil would go as a pair as well, also as merchants. Everybody else would stay home.

But just then, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind popped up and said he wanted to go as well, and would not take no for an answer. So, Song Jiang relented and told him, "If you insist on going, then you must not stir up trouble. You will travel disguised as my companion." And just so he didn't have to spend all his time babysitting Li Kui, Song Jiang told Yan Qing the Prodigy, who used to live in the capital, to come along.

There was one other issue: Song Jiang was a convicted criminal, which meant he had received a face tattoo marking him as such, and that would be a dead giveaway in the capital. But as it turns out, after they "recruited" the healer An (1) Daoquan (4,2), he had devised a course of treatment that was basically the Song Dynasty equivalent of laser tattoo removal. So with a little bit of time, Song Jiang had managed to wipe away that reminder of his crime.

Anyway, Song Jiang and Chai Jin disguised themselves as officials on vacation. They also brought along Dai Zong the Magic Traveler, who was disguised as a lieutenant, just in case they needed to send an urgent message back to Liangshan. Li Kui and Yan Qing dressed up as their servants and carried their luggage.

As the other chieftains saw them off, Wu Yong the strategist kept reminding Li Kui, "Whenever you leave the mountain, you always cause trouble of some kind. This time, you are going with Brother Song to the capital. It's no ordinary matter. Do not drink on the road, and be careful in all things. Don't lose your temper. If you cause an altercation without other brothers to back you up, we might not get to meet again."

"Don't worry, I won't cause any trouble this time," Li Kui said, making a rather ambitious promise. Anyway, the traveling party left the base, and headed toward the capital. They arrived without incident and found lodging at an inn outside the Gate of Eternal Life.

It was the 11th day of the first month of the year, four days before the Lantern Festival. Song Jiang said to Chai Jin, "I obviously do not dare to enter the city during the day tomorrow. Let's wait until the night of the 14th, when there will be lots of people out and about."

Chai Jin volunteered to go into the city with Yan Qing the prodigy the next day to check out the situation, so they both dressed up in their finest and headed toward the city the next morning. Along the way, they saw that every household on the outskirts of the city was in a festive mood as the citizens prepared to celebrate the peaceful atmosphere. Chai Jin and Yan Qing entered the city without any problem and were greeted with a sprawling, impressive city.

The two strolled along the streets, taking in the sights. When they went by the palace's East Glory Gate, they saw an endless stream of people dressed in colorful clothing, sitting and chatting in the tea houses and taverns. Chai Jin and Yan Qing went into a small tavern and took a room upstairs that had a view of the streets. As they leaned over the railing and watched, they saw numerous attendants walking around, all wearing a fabric flower with jade-green leaves tacked to the side of their hats.

Chai Jin now whispered a few words to Yan Qing. Yan Qing immediately went downstairs, stepped out of the tavern, and bowed to the first attendant he came across.

"I don't recognize you; I don't think we've met before," the attendant said.

“My master is an old friend of yours,” Yan Qing said. “He sent me to invite you to join him. Aren’t you Inspector Zhang?”

“No, my last name is Wang.”

“Ah, that’s right. My master told me to invite Inspector Wang. I just forgot.”

So Inspector Wang followed Yan Qing upstairs. Yan Qing lifted the curtain to the dining room and said to Chai Jin, “Here is Inspector Wang,” as he flashed Chai Jin a hidden signal with his hand. Chai Jin invited his guest into the room and they greeted each other.

Inspector Wang stared at Chai Jin for a good while but did not recognize him, so he said, “I am so forgetful. I don’t remember who you are. Please tell me your honorable name.”

Chai Jin laughed and said, “We were friends as kids. I won’t tell you my name quite yet, but you’ll think of it.”

He then ordered wine and food. Once the dishes arrived, Yan Qing poured wine for them and kept encouraging them to drink more. After a while, Chai Jin asked Inspector Wang, “What’s with that flower on your hat?”

Inspector Wang replied, “His majesty is celebrating the Lantern Festival. There are 24 companies of attendants, totaling about 5,800 men. Each of us has been bestowed a new robe and a fabric flower. Each flower has a small golden badge pinned above it that says “Celebrate with the people.” So we are always on call, and only those wearing the robe and the flower are allowed into the palace.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Chai Jin said.

They drank a few more cups, and then Chai Jin told Yan Qing, “Go fetch me a cup of warm wine.”

The warm wine arrived momentarily, and Chai Jin rose and offered a toast to Inspector Wang, saying, “Sir, please drink this cup, and then I will tell you my name.”

“I really can’t think of your name; I hope you will share it,” Inspector Wang said as he took the cup of wine and downed it all in one gulp. And he immediately started drooling out of the corner of his mouth and fell backward onto his chair.

Chai Jin quickly removed his own clothes and put on the inspector’s robe, shoes, and such. He then took the inspector’s flower hat. He turned to Yan Qing and said, “When the waiter comes by, just tell him that the inspector got drunk and that your master went out and hasn’t come back yet.”

“No need to worry; I’ve got it covered,” Yan Qing assured him.

Chai Jin then walked out of the tavern, went through the East Glory Gate, and entered the palace, which was so lavish and splendid that it looked like heaven on earth. Because he was wearing the right clothes, no one stopped him as he went through the various doors.

So, during the Northern Song, the imperial palace had a street running through it that goes east and west, with a Glory Gate at each end. To the south of the street were situated various administrative offices and venues, including halls for ceremonies, the national library, the military affairs bureau, and such. Chai Jin went past one of the main ceremonial halls, as well as the hall where the emperor attended to government business. But both of them were locked.

Chai Jin walked on, and when he passed one of the inner halls, he turned and came upon a side hall, where a plaque stood with golden characters that said, “Hall of Deep Thought.” This was the imperial library, and its vermilion doors made of ornately carved wood were open.

Chai Jin slipped into the library and saw the emperor’s seat directly across from him, flanked by tables on which sat the so-called four scholarly treasures: brush with ivory handles, decorated paper, imperial ink slabs, and ink grindstones from one of the locations that were famous for producing high-quality grindstones. The bookcases were filled with books, each with ivory fasteners. In a screen directly in front of him was a gorgeous landscape painting.

Chai Jin stepped behind the screen and saw that the back was blank except for four names. These were the names of the four leading outlaws of the day. They were:

- Song Jiang in the East
- Wang Qing (4) in the west
- Tian (2) Hu (3) in the North
- And Fang (1) La (4) in the South

Reading the four names, Chai Jin thought to himself, "The country is suffering from our disturbances, and we occupy their thoughts so much that they have written our names here."

After a moment's thought, he pulled out his dagger and cut off the piece of the screen that sported Song Jiang's name. He then rushed out of the library, right before someone else came in. Chai Jin now left the palace through the East Glory Gate and returned to the tavern, where he found Inspector Wang still passed out. He quickly changed back into his own clothes. He and Yan Qing then paid their bill, gave the waiter a big tip, and told him as they left, "I am a good friend of Inspector Wang's. He passed out drunk just now, so I went to sign in at the palace for him. He's still not awake yet. I live outside the city, and I don't want to get locked inside the city when the gates close for the day. You can have all the change that's left, and here is the inspector's clothing."

The waiter assured him that the inspector would be well looked after, and Chai Jin and Yan Qing then left the tavern and headed out through the Gate of Eternal Life.

Much, much later, Inspector Wang finally woke up, and it was already dark. When he came to, he noticed that his robe and his hat were sitting next to him, which had him greatly puzzled. The waiter now relayed Chai Jin's message, and Inspector Wang was either really drunk or really dim, or a little bit of both, because he didn't think much of it and just went home.

And then, the next day, word trickled out from the palace that the name Song Jiang had been cut out of the screen in the imperial library, so security was put on high alert at all the palace gates. Only now did Inspector Wang begin to suspect something wasn't quite right about a random stranger inviting him to wine, claiming to be a childhood friend, getting him drunk, borrowing his imperial robe to ... umm ... sign in for him. But Inspector Wang knew what was good for him, and so he kept his mouth shut.

Meanwhile, Chai Jin returned to the inn outside the city and told Song Jiang what happened. He then showed Song Jiang the piece of the screen with his name on it, which drew many sighs of lamentation from Song Jiang.

A couple days later, as dusk approached on the 14th day of the month, a bright moon was rising in the east, climbing into a clear sky. Song Jiang, Chai Jin, Dai Zong, and Yan Qing donned their disguises and prepared to head out. But they ordered Li Kui to stay behind and watch the room, much to his delight, I'm sure. Song Jiang and the other three chieftains then mixed in with a noisy crowd and streamed into the city.

The night was warm and the winds were calm, making it the perfect weather for sightseeing. On the main thoroughfare, every household had awnings decorated with lanterns, lighting up the night as bright as day. The buildings were bedecked with lanterns, and the streets were jammed with people.

The four men turned off of Imperial Road and onto a street that was lined on both sides with signs advertising establishments of quote, the misty moon. This was the red light district. Midway down the street, they saw a house whose doorway was covered by a blue drape. Behind it was a curtain of spotted bamboo. The windows on both sides were covered with green gauze. Between the windows and the door hung two vertical plaques, each sporting five characters. The plaques said, "Fairy Maid of Song and Dance; Flower of Surpassing Grace."

Their curiosity piqued by this house, Song Jiang and company sat down in a teahouse nearby and asked the waiter about the occupant.

“Her name is Li (3) Shishi (1,1), and she is the top courtesan in the capital,” the waiter informed them.

“The one who is having a torrid affair with the emperor?” Song Jiang asked. I guess people just love royal gossip no matter what time or place in history.

“Not so loud,” the waiter warned. “There are eyes and ears nearby.”

Song Jiang now whispered to Yan Qing, “I want to meet this Li (3) Shishi to arrange something privately with her. You go make up a cover story and get inside. I’ll wait here for you.”

So Yan Qing strode over to the house, lifted up the curtains and went inside. When he arrived at an inner door, he saw a pair of lanterns hanging over a rhino-hide table. On the table sat a bronze incense urn, from which emanated thin wisps of smoke. On the walls on either side hung four landscape paintings by famous artists. Below the paintings sat a row of four rhino-hide arm chairs.

But there was no one around, so Yan Qing walked on, crossing a small courtyard and entering another parlor. In this room sat three small beds made from fragrant, ornate wood, and cushioned with purple mattresses sporting a design that depicted flower petals falling into a babbling stream. On a stand hung a fine lamp, and a few rare antiques sat around the room.

Yan Qing cleared his throat, and a maid appeared from behind the screen. She paid her respects to Yan Qing and asked, “Brother, what is your honorable name? Where are you from?”

“Good sister, please ask your mama to come out. I would like to have a word with her,” Yan Qing said. And just to clarify here, when he said ask your mama to come out, he was referring to the woman who runs the establishment.

The maid went back behind the screen, and momentarily, Madam Li (3) came out. Yan Qing asked her to have a seat, and then he kneeled and bowed four times to her.

“Young man, what is your name?” she asked.

“Mama, you forgot? I am the son of Zhang the Second. My name is Zhang Xian (2).”

Now, saying your last name is Zhang was basically the same as saying your last name is Smith.

Madam Li wracked her brain trying to figure out which of the hundreds or thousands of Zhangs who may have patronized her establishment this young man might be. After a while, she asked, “Are you the little Zhang Xian (2) who lives under the Peace Bridge? Where have you been? You haven’t come here in a long time.”

“I’ve been away from home, so I haven’t been able to call,” Yan Qing said. “Right now I am serving a merchant in Shandong Province. He has endless property and is the most famous wealthy man in the region. Tonight, he has come to the capital to join the celebration, visit relatives, do some business, and to request an audience with Miss Li (3). He would be content to just share a cup of tea with the lady. I would not dare to ask otherwise. He has thousands of taels of silver to offer.”

Well, Madam Li was all about the money, so she didn’t need much convincing and immediately summoned the courtesan Li Shishi. In the flickering light of the lantern, Yan Qing took a look at her, and she was indeed as beautiful as they said.

After Yan Qing bowed to offer his respects, Madam Li relayed his request, and Li Shishi asked, “Where is that magnate now?”

“He is in the tea house up the street.”

“Please invite him to our humble abode for tea,” Li Shishi said.

“Without your permission, we would never dare to intrude,” Yan Qing said.

So, a quick pause here. This Li Shishi may have been a courtesan, but not all courtesans necessarily provided sexual services to all clients. In fact, some high-class, renowned ones were able to be rather

choosy about whom they showed favor to and what kind of services they provided. Often times, they just offered some pleasant companionship for some member of the literati or other high-class individuals. That's why Yan Qing is showing such deference here.

Anyway, at the behest of the courtesan and the madam, Yan Qing now went back to the tea house and whispered to Song Jiang about the invite. Dai Zong the Magic Traveler took out some money and paid the waiter, and the four men went to Li Shishi's house and were welcomed into the main parlor.

There, Li Shishi greeted them and said to Song Jiang, "Zhang Xian (2) here was just telling us about your generosity. Your visit brings luster to our humble abode."

"I am but a country bumpkin from an obscure mountain hamlet," Song Jiang replied. "To be able to gaze upon your beauty is my greatest fortune."

Li Shishi asked them to sit and then pointed at Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind and asked Song Jiang who he was, and Song Jiang said that was his cousin. He also told Dai Zong to pay his respects to Li Shishi. They then sat down, with Song Jiang and Chai Jin on the left as guests, and Li Shishi on the right as the host. A servant woman brought out tea, and Li Shishi personally offered cups to the four guests. And it goes without saying that the tea was of top-notch quality. This was a high-class joint, in case you hadn't noticed.

After tea, they started a pleasant conversation. But just then, the madam rushed in and said, "His majesty just arrived and is in the back."

Li Shishi said to Song Jiang and company, "I really do not dare to keep you. But his majesty is due to visit the Upper Purity Temple soon and will not come here for a while. At that time, I can invite you all to return for a few cups of wine."

Song Jiang respectfully offered his goodbye, and the four men left the house, walked out of the side street, and headed to a large bridge to see the turtle-shaped mound covered with lanterns. As they were passing a famous restaurant, they heard instruments and the sounds of merrymaking blaring from the

pavilion as visitors milled around like ants amid countless lanterns. So the four men went into the pavilion, found a dining room upstairs and sat down. They ordered some food and wine and began drinking and enjoying the sights.

Before long, they suddenly heard someone in the next room singing a song. The song went:

Our courage surges toward the heavens like a bull,

Yet our heroic task remains unfulfilled.

With dragon sword grasped firm in hand,

We won't quit until every scoundrel's killed.

Song Jiang, no stranger to drunken words of sedition, got worried when he heard those lines, so he rushed next door, and who should he find but two of his own. Shi Jin the Nine-Tattooed Dragons and Mu Hong the Unrestrained were drunk off their butts and spewing dangerously reckless words.

Song Jiang rushed in and reproached them, "Brothers, you scared me half to death! Quickly, pay your tab and leave right now. It's a good thing you ran into me. If some cops heard what you are saying, it would be no small calamity. I would have never expected that you two would act so recklessly! Leave the city at once. Do not delay. Tomorrow, once you have seen the main lantern display, return to Liangshan right away. That's the best course of action; we don't want any trouble!"

That scolding left Shi Jin and Mu Hong hanging their heads in silence. They sheepishly summoned the waiter to pay their bill, and then left the city. Song Jiang and his group remained and drank a few more cups, and they were all now buzzing a little bit, too. Dai Zong paid the tab, and the four men left the pavilion and exited the city through the Gate of Eternal Life.

As soon as they entered their room back at the inn, Li Kui woke up and started complaining to Song Jiang.

“Brother, it’s one thing if you just didn’t bring me here at all. Yet you brought me on the trip, but made me stay behind to watch the room. I was bored out of my mind, while you all went to have fun!”

Song Jiang said, “It’s because you have an ill temper and a vicious appearance, so I did not dare to bring you into the city. I was worried it would cause trouble.”

“If you just don’t want me to come along, then say it. Don’t be making lame excuses!” Li Kui grumbled. “When have I ever scared other people?!”

Umm, dude, you are kidding right? Like, literally every other page featuring you in this novel has you terrorizing the populace. Nonetheless, the griping worked, and Song Jiang said, “Alright, I’ll bring you tomorrow night so you can see the main lantern display. And then we will leave right away.”

That pleased Li Kui, and he laughed raucously.

The next day was the 15th of the first month, the day of the Lantern Festival. Under a clear evening sky, countless people crowded into the streets of the capital and made merry. Mixed in with this crowd were Song Jiang and his four traveling companions, who entered again through the Gate of Eternal Life. There was no curfew that night on account of the festival, but at every gate stood soldiers clad in full armor and wielding all manners of weapons, keeping a tight watch. Marshall Gao Qiu, the petty villain of the novel, personally led 5,000 armored cavalry to patrol the city.

Once Song Jiang and company entered the city, Song Jiang whispered some instructions to Yan Qing and told him, “We’ll meet you tonight at the tea house.”

A little while later, Yan Qing showed up at the door of the courtesan Li Shishi. Both the courtesan and the madam came out to greet him and said, “We hope your master did not take offense. His majesty comes here from time to time, and we of course do not dare to slight him.”

“My master sends his apologies for disturbing you,” Yan Qing said. “Shandong is a remote, backwater place and doesn’t have any treasures. Even our local specialties are not anything special. So he asked me to bring you 100 taels of gold as a token of his esteem. When he gets his hands on something valuable, he will send that along.”

The madam now asked where Yan Qing’s master was, and he said, “My master is waiting at the entrance to the street. Once I report back, we are going to see the lanterns.”

Now, the madam, as we had already established, was a greedy woman. When she saw Yan Qing shoving all that gold in her face, she felt inclined to ... umm ... nurture this client.

“Tonight is the Lantern Festival, and we are preparing some wine,” she told Yan Qing. “If the magnate would not spurn us, please invite him to visit our humble abode for a short while.”

“I will go right now, and he will come for sure,” Yan Qing said. He then returned to the tea house and relayed the invitation to Song Jiang. Minutes later, they showed up at Li Shishi’s house again. Song Jiang told Dai Zong and Li Kui to wait by the door, while he, Chai Jin, and Yan Qing went inside.

Li Shishi greeted the three visitors and thanked Song Jiang for the gift, saying, “Sir, we just met, and yet you have already given me such a big gift. It is really too much.”

“I am from a remote backwater place and have no treasures to offer,” Song Jiang said. “So I just sent along a trifle to express my esteem. No need to thank me.”

Li Shishi then invited them to a small guest room and sat down. The madam and the maid brought forth fine wine and delicacies on fine serving ware. Li Shishi offered wine to Song Jiang and Chai Jin, bowed, and said, “It must be karma from a previous life for me to have the good fortune to meet you two gentlemen. Please receive this simple wine.”

Song Jiang replied, “Although I have some property in my mountain home, I have never seen anything so lavish as your abode. Your fame is known throughout the land, beautiful and charming lady.

It's harder to get an audience with you than to reach heaven, and yet here I am, chatting and drinking with you in person!"

"Sir, you are too kind with your praise. It is too much for me," Li Shishi said.

After they both drank, Li Shishi told her maid to keep pouring wine in small golden cups. She then loosened up and started to share gossip about others in her profession. But to all this, it was Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind who replied, while Yan Qing stood off to one side and offered quips that made everyone laugh.

After a few cups of wine, Song Jiang started buzzing a little bit, and his tongue loosened up, as did his demeanor, and he started acting like he usually does in Liangshan's wild, crazy feasts. Chai Jin smiled and said to Li Shishi, "My cousin is always like this when he drinks; please do not take offense."

"Drinking is for pleasure, so why stand on ceremony?" Li Shishi said.

Just then, the maid hurried in and said, "Of the two companions waiting at the front door, one has yellow whiskers, looks very scary, and is cursing up a storm."

Uh oh. To see what trouble Li Kui was stirring up, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also, exactly what is Song Jiang doing with this courtesan? To find out, join us next time. Thanks for listening!