

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 104.

Last time, Yan Qing the Prodigy heard that a big guy named Ren (4) Yuan (2) was holding a wrestling contest and challenging everyone from across the land to take him on. Yan Qing, despite his slender frame, decided to go to the temple fair in Tai'an (4,1) Prefecture, where the contest was being held, to answer the challenge. He traveled to the fair, threw down the figurative gauntlet by smashing up the trash-talking sign that Ren Yuan had put up, and then walked away.

Farther up the road, Yan Qing caught up to Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, who had snuck off the base to accompany him on this trip. The two then went in search of lodging. The area around the temple was hopping. Peddlers from 120 trades were displaying their wares, and there were nearly 1,500 inns, receiving guests from all over the land. But during holidays, all these places were full. Yan Qing and Li Kui found a place at the far edge of the fairgrounds. They laid down their luggage, and asked for a bed for Li Kui to sleep on.

The clerk at the inn, however, looked at Yan Qing, who was dressed like a peddler, and said, "Brother, you are a peddler from Shandong Province, coming to sell your stuff at the fair, right? Are you able to afford a room?"

Speaking in a Shandong accent, Yan Qing replied, "What disrespect! How much can a little room be worth? Even if it were a large room, I will pay you whatever others pay you."

"Brother, please don't misunderstand," the clerk said. "This is a busy time, so it's best to make things clear up front."

"I'm here to do business, so it doesn't matter to me; I can rest anywhere," Yan Qing said. "But I ran into this relative from my home village along the way, and he came down with asthma. That's why we are asking to stay here. I'll give you five strings of copper coins first. Go prepare some tea and food for us, and we will pay for it all when we leave."

The clerk took the money and went to prepare the food and tea. Before long, a commotion broke out outside, and about 30 strong men walked in and asked the clerk, "Which room is that hero who smashed the sign staying in?"

"What? He's not here," the clerk replied.

"No, everyone said he came in here."

"Look, I just have two rooms. One is empty, and the other is occupied by a peddler from Shandong who's with a man that's sick."

"That must be the guy who smashed the sign," the men said.

"Stop joking around," the clerk told them. "That peddler is just a scrawny young man. What can he do?"

"Just take us to go have a look at him," the men insisted.

The clerk pointed them toward the room where Yan Qing was staying. Since the door was shut tight, the group went over and peeked through the window. They saw two men lying on the bed, but couldn't really make them out.

One man among the group said, "Since he had the courage to come smash the sign and take on the challenge, he must be an uncommon man. He must be worried that someone might try to harm him before the match, so he's pretending to be sick."

Everyone else chimed in in agreement, saying, "You're right. No need to guess who he is. We will find out on the day of the match."

Before dusk, some 30 groups of men had dropped by to see the guy who dared to accept the challenge, and the clerk's lips were dried and cracked from all the times he had to tell them that there was no wrestling hero here. That evening, he brought food for the two guests. When he saw Li Kui poke his head out from under the covers, the clerk was startled and cried out, "Wow! This must be the hero who's coming to wrestle!"

But Yan Qing said, "He's not the one. He's sick. I'm the one who's wrestling."

"Stop lying," the clerk said, "That Ren (4) Yuan (2) can swallow you whole."

"Don't mock me," Yan Qing told him. "I have my ways; I'll give y'all something to laugh at. And then I'll give you a bunch of my rewards."

The clerk was like, ok sure, whatever. He waited until they were done with dinner, cleaned up the dishes, and went back to the kitchen.

The next morning after breakfast, Yan Qing told Li Kui to stay in their room, while he mixed in with the crowd and headed to the temple, which lived up to its reputation as a top destination. After doing the tourist thing for a while, Yan Qing went to the main hall and prayed to the idols. He then asked some of the other visitors where the wrestler Ren Yuan was. Some nosy individual told him, "He's staying at that big inn at the foot of Welcoming Kindness Bridge. He's teaching more than 300 disciples."

So Yan Qing headed that way. At the bridge, he saw about 30 wrestling students sitting on the railing. Up ahead were gold-trimmed pennants and banners, embroidered canopies, and backrests as tall as a man. Yan Qing slipped into the inn, and saw the wrestler Ren Yuan seated in a pavilion, looking like an idol of a god. With his chest bare and carrying the countenance of a slayer of tigers and mover of mountains, he sat on a bench and watched his students wrestle.

Some of the folks hanging around recognized Yan Qing as the one who smashed up the sign yesterday, so they quietly mentioned it to Ren Yuan. Ren Yuan leaped to his feet, fanned out his arms, and declared, "Whose turn is it to die this year? Bring me your life!"

Yan Qing lowered his head and quickly ducked out of the inn, hearing laughter behind him. He rushed back to his own inn and had some dinner with Li Kui, who complained about having to stay in bed all day.

"Just make it through tonight," Yan Qing told him. "Tomorrow we'll see who's the superior fighter."

Around midnight, they heard drums and music from outside. This was from a sacrificial ceremony at the temple. Then, around 2 a.m., Yan Qing and Li Kui got out of bed and washed up. They combed their hair smooth, took off their padded gowns, wrapped their legs in knee-length bindings, and put on silk trousers, hemp sandals, and clean shirts, which were tied around the waist with a sash.

Once they were dressed, they told the clerk to watch their luggage, and he said not to worry and wished Yan Qing good luck. There were about 30 other tourists at the inn, and they all told Yan Qing, "Young man, think this through. Don't throw away your life for nothing."

But he just told them, "When everyone is cheering my victory, you can help me collect some presents."

After the crowd went on ahead to the fairgrounds, Li Kui said, "I might as well bring my two axes."

"No, that won't do," Yan Qing quickly stopped him. "If someone recognizes you, it would cause trouble."

So the two mixed in with the teeming throngs and headed to the temple, finding an inconspicuous place to lay low for the time being.

That day, the pilgrims coming to offer incense were so numerous that they were pressed against each other. The huge temple was overflowing, and even the ridges of the roof were lined with people. Facing the hall of the temple, a shed had been erected, and in it were stored gold and silver trophies and prizes of silks and satins. At the door of the hall, five fine horses were hitched, all with top-grade saddles and bridles.

The local prefect now ordered that no more pilgrims be admitted into the temple as the wrestling contest drew near. An old referee, holding a bundle of bamboo rods, ascended the platform outside the

hall and offered prayer to the Emperor of Heaven. He then declared the contest open and asked competitors to present themselves.

He barely finished his announcement when a tide of humanity surged forward. A dozen or so staff-wielding guards cleared the way and hoisted four embroidered pennants. A sedan chair then appeared, carrying the champion Ren Yuan. The chair was surrounded by an entourage of about 30 stout, tattooed men. They made their way through the crowd. At the foot of the platform, the referee invited Ren Yuan to step down from the chair, and welcomed him with a few friendly words.

Ren Yuan had his hair tied up in a topknot and bound with red thread. He wore a jade green silk tunic fastened at the waist over a shirt with three rows of jade buttons and trimmed with gold ruffles. His knee-length pants were plated with bronze and had a bronze crotch protector. Iron plates and rings encircled the calves of his legs. His wrists were firmly taped, and his feet were shod in shoes made for kicking.

“I have won the title the last two years and taken some prizes without doing a thing,” Ren Yuan declared. “This year, I must see some action.”

Then, a man brought over a bucket of water. Ren Yuan’s disciples crowded at the edge of the platform. Ren Yuan now opened his sash, removed his headscarf, draped his padded silk tunic over his shoulders, and loudly hailed the Emperor of Heaven. He then drank two sips of the “holy water” and removed his tunic amid thundering cheers from the tens of thousands of onlookers.

The referee now said, “The master has not met his match in two years at the temple. This year is his third time. Master, what do you have to say to all the pilgrims here?”

Ren Yuan declared, “Pilgrims have come from all over the land to pay respect to the Emperor of Heaven. For two years, I have received your presents without having to do anything. I will retire after this year and never come here again. From where the sun rises in the east to where it sets in the west,

beneath the sky where the sun and moon sail, from the land of the Southern barbarians to the remote regions of Yan (1) in the North, is there a man who dares to contend with me for the prizes?"

Just then, a shout came from the crowd, "Right here!"

In the next second, Yan Qing, pushing off the shoulders of a couple people in the crowd, leaped onto the platform, accompanied by a chorus of cheers.

"What is your name and where are you from?" the referee asked.

"I am Peddler Zhang from Shandong Province. I have come specifically to fight him for the prizes."

The referee now warned him, "Look, your life hangs in the balance. Do you understand? Do you have someone to vouch for you?"

"I vouch for myself. If I get killed, no one will have to die for me."

"Why don't you take off your shirt and let us size you up first?" the referee said.

So Yan Qing took off his headscarf, his sandals, and his shirt. He then struck a pose, and a loud cheer went up from the crowd as everyone was astonished by his physique and his tattoos. Ren Yuan saw what everyone else saw and was feeling a bit intimidated.

The prefect now summoned Yan Qing from the platform and called him over to have a closer look at him. When he saw Yan Qing's tattoos, which looked like carvings on a jade column, the prefect was quite impressed and asked Yan Qing where he was from and what brought him here.

"My last name is Zhang, and I am the oldest son in my family. I am from Caizhou (4,1) Prefecture in Shandong Province. I heard that Ren Yuan had issued a challenge to the entire realm, so I came specifically to fight him."

The prefect said, "That horse over there and all its equipment are a prize from me to Ren Yuan. As for all the prizes that are in the shed, how about you two divide them between you evenly, and then I'll give you a post by my side?"

“My lord,” Yan Qing said, “the prizes don’t matter. I just want to knock him down so everyone can have a good laugh and a good cheer.”

“But he is built like a god; you can’t get near him,” the prefect said with concern.

“Even if I die, I would not hold a grudge,” Yan Qing declared.

Well alright then. The conversation over, Yan Qing now returned to the platform. The referee first asked him to sign a waiver in case of horrific death and dismemberment, and then read him the rules. When he was done, he said to Yan Qing, “You got it? No dirty tricks.”

Yan Qing chuckled, “He’s got protection all over his body, while I have nothing. How can I deliver any cheap shots?”

Just then, the prefect called the referee over and told him, “That guy is quite an impressive young man. It would be a shame if he got killed. Go talk him out of it and call it a draw.”

The referee returned to the platform and said to Yan Qing, “Why don’t you hang on to your life and go home? I’ll declare this match a draw.”

“What nonsense,” Yan Qing retorted. “You don’t even know if I will win or lose.”

And the crowd also joined in, demanding that the referee let the fight proceed, since, hey what do you think we are all packed in here for if not to see someone get bloodied and possibly killed? And by now, Ren Yuan was seething with hatred for Yan Qing, wishing he could chuck this little pipsqueak into the clouds and have him break his neck on the way down.

Since everyone was demanding a fight, the referee relented and said, “Since you two insist on wrestling, then let this match be in the name of the Emperor of Heaven. Be careful, both of you.”

And so, the platform was cleared of everyone except the two contestants and the referee. By now, the early morning mist was dissipating and the sun was rising in the east. The referee held his bamboo rods, told both contestants to get ready, and then shouted, “Fight!”

Yan Qing crouched on the right side of the platform, while Ren Yuan stood on the left. They each occupied half of the platform, and they were supposed to meet in the middle. But Yan Qing didn't budge. Seeing this, Ren Yuan started to advance, and he noticed Yan Qing staring at his legs.

"He must be trying to go low," Ren Yuan thought to himself. "Fine, I won't even use my hands. I'll just kick this knave off the stage."

So he kept pressing toward Yan Qing and pretended to kick with his left foot. But Yan Qing shouted, "Don't even try it!" Just as Ren Yuan approached him, Yan Qing suddenly ducked under his opponent's left shoulder and slipped behind him. Ren Yuan got mad and quickly turned to try to grab him, but Yan Qing again slipped past him, this time ducking under his right shoulder.

By now, Ren Yuan's footwork was all messed up from all the twisting and turning to keep up with Yan Qing. Yan Qing now charged toward his foe, grabbed his shoulder with the right hand and his crotch with the left, and then shoved his shoulder under Ren Yuan's chest. And with one heave, he lifted Ren Yuan off his feet. Going with the momentum, Yan Qing twirled five times with his hapless foe dangling feet in the air, and as he neared the edge of the stage, he shouted, "Down you go!" With one thrust, Yan Qing flung Ren Yuan head first to the ground below, using a move called the Pigeon Pirouette.

The crowd roared with approval, yet there was one group among them that did not cheer. These were the 30-some disciples of Ren Yuan's. Seeing their master get tossed off the stage, they immediately knocked over the shed and started taking all the prizes, because fair play is what now? The prefect's men could do nothing to stop them, but someone else in the crowd now got pissed. This was none other than Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, whose eyes grew wide and whose whiskers stood on end. He had no weapon at hand, so he pulled up a pine sapling as if he were plucking a green onion, snapped it in two, and wielded the two lengths of tree trunk as he started beating people left and right.

It was then that someone in the crowd recognized him and pointed him out to the guards, who immediately shouted, "Don't let Liangshan's Black Whirlwind get away!!"



As soon as he heard that, the prefect was scared out of his mind and ran toward the back of the temple. The entire crowd also descended into chaos as all the pilgrims ran for their lives. Li Kui made his way over to the spot where Ren Yuan was still lying on the ground, barely conscious and breathing. Li Kui now grabbed a stone tablet and brought it down on Ren Yuan with all his might, crushing him to a pulp. Yan Qing now joined him as the two fought their way toward the temple entrance. But from outside the temple came a barrage of arrows, forcing them to climb onto the roof and start flinging tiles down at the soldiers.

Just then, loud roars rose up from the entrance, as a group of men fought their way in. At their head was a man donning a white hat and a white robe, carrying long and short-handled broadswords. This was none other than Lu Junyi the Jade Qilin, Liangshan's No. 2. Behind him came seven other chieftains: Shi Jin the Nine Tattoo Dragons, Mu Hong the Unrestrained, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, Wu Song the Pilgrim, and the two hunter brothers, Xie Zhen and Xie Bao. They were accompanied by about 1,000 lackeys as they cleared the entrance.

Yan Qing and Li Kui now jumped down from the roof and rushed out with this group. Li Kui ran back to the inn, fetched his twin axes, and returned to the scene to do more killing. By the time the authorities organized their troops, the bandits were already long gone from the temple. And the authorities knew Liangshan's reputation, so nobody dared to give chase.

Later that day, on the road back to Liangshan, Lu Junyi was like, "Hey, has anybody seen Black Whirlwind?" When the answer was no, Lu Junyi chuckled and said, "What a troublemaker. We must have someone find him and bring him back to the base." Mu Hong the Unrestrained volunteered, and so he went off in search of Li Kui while everyone else continued on their journey back to Liangshan.

So, where did Li Kui go? Well, after getting his fill of carnage, he ran down the road with axes in hand. Around noon, he arrived in a nearby county. He went straight to the county magistrate's office, where court had adjourned after the morning session and folks were just chilling on their lunch break. Suddenly, Li Kui stomped in and roared, "Here's your daddy Black Whirlwind!!"

All the people in the office compound were paralyzed with fear. As it so happened, this county was but a stone's throw away from Liangshan, so everyone was always wary of a visit from the bandits. In particular, just hearing the name Li Kui the Black Whirlwind was enough to stop infants from crying at night. And now, the boogeyman was here in the flesh!

Li Kui strode over to the magistrate's chair and made himself at home. He then shouted, "Somebody, come out here and talk. Or I'll set fire to this place!"

The cowering staff in one of the rooms talked amongst themselves and decided that SOMEBODY had better go out there or Li Kui might make good on his threat. So two guys who drew the short straw came out and kowtowed four times to Li Kui.

"Chieftain, you must have come bearing advice for us," they said while trembling.

"I didn't come to disturb your residents. I was just passing through and wanted to have some fun. Ask your magistrate to come out; I want to talk to him."

"When you came in just now, the magistrate ran out the backdoor; we don't know where he went."

Li Kui didn't believe them, and decided to search the private quarters for himself. But there was indeed no sign of the magistrate. Instead, he found the chest for the magistrate's official robes and hat. So, he broke the lock and put on the magisterial robe, belt, boots, and hat. He then strolled back out front and shouted for all the officers to come see him. The staff had no choice but to gather.

"What do you think of my little get-up?" he asked them.

"Oh, it fits you perfectly!" everyone said in unison.

“Go set up the courthouse for me. If you don’t do as I say, then I will turn this county into a wasteland.”

Well, no one was gonna tell Black Whirlwind no, so they gathered up some officers and took their stations in the courthouse. After three rounds of drums, court was officially in session.

Li Kui laughed raucously and said, “Bring me a case.”

“Chieftain, with you here, who would dare to come submit a petition?” the officers said.

“I know that. So just have a couple of you pretend to be litigants. I won’t harm them; I’m just looking for a good laugh.”

The officers talked amongst themselves a bit and decided that two jailers would play the litigants. By now, a group of civilians had gathered outside the courtroom to witness these farcical proceedings. The two jailers kneeled in the courtroom and presented a made-up case.

The “plaintiff” said, “My lord, please take pity on me. He beat me.”

The “accused” retorted, “He cursed me; that’s why I beat him.”

“Who’s the one that got beaten up?” Li Kui asked.

The plaintiff raised his hand, and Li Kui said, “The guy who beat you up was a real man; he goes free. As for you, you useless thing! How can you let someone beat you up? Men, put a cangue on him and put him on display outside the courthouse.”

Li Kui then got up, pulled up his magisterial robe so it won’t drag on the floor, and tucked the magistrate’s official tablet in his belt. He then pulled out his axe and watched until the guards actually put the “plaintiff” in a cangue and put him on display outside the courthouse. Only then did Li Kui stomp off, not even bothering to take off the magistrate’s clothes. As they watched him go, all the civilians doubled over laughing.

As he was strolling around town, Li Kui came across a classroom and heard the sound of students reading aloud. He lifted up the curtain and walked in. A few seconds later, a panic-stricken teacher leaped out through the window, followed by Li Kui coming back out the door, laughing raucously and leaving behind a throng of crying, hiding, and fleeing students.

Just then, Mu Hong the Unrestrained showed up and was like, "Wow, I'm the voice of reason?!"

"Everyone is worried sick about you; turns out you're stirring things up here! Hurry up and come back to Liangshan!" he said as he pulled Li Kui along.

Li Kui reluctantly followed. The two actually made it back to Liangshan without further incident. When they returned to base, everyone couldn't help but laugh at Li Kui's outfit. He went to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, where Song Jiang was celebrating Yan Qing's victory in the wrestling match.

Li Kui let his magisterial robe hang down, put away his axes, and strode over to pay his respects to Song Jiang. But he had barely bowed twice before he tore his robe and tripped, falling to the ground, drawing another round of laughter from the other chieftains.

Song Jiang, however, was not laughing. He scolded Li Kui, "You've got some nerve, sneaking off the mountain without telling me! That's punishable by death! And you caused trouble wherever you went. I'm making it clear today in front of everyone: I will not spare you again!"

So, that's like the fourth or fifth time now that Song Jiang has promised he would not spare Li Kui the next time. So you know, whatever. Li Kui uttered his apologies, and all was well again. Business went on as usual, and the bandits continued to train every day on land and water, and prepared weapons, armor, and banners for their next military encounter.

Well, that next military encounter might be coming soon, since Tai'an Prefecture was sending word to the capital about our heroes crashing their festival and wrestling competition. And numerous other prefectures were also reporting run-ins with our heroes.

Unfortunately for all those local prefects and magistrates, the emperor had gone a month without holding court. Finally, one day he decided to get back to the business of running the country, so he went to court. It was then that the official in charge of petitions informed him that they received numerous reports of bandits led by Song Jiang attacking cities, raiding storehouses, killing soldiers and civilians, and just generally running amok without any resistance.

The emperor said, "Those bandits ran amok in the capital during the Lantern Festival, and now they are causing trouble everywhere, especially in the area near their lair. I have sent numerous orders for the Council of Military Affairs to send troops to apprehend them, but I still haven't received any reports so far."

Well, just a guess here, but it could be that the layabouts in the council have been trying to keep this quiet since everyone they've sent to attack Liangshan not only lost, but ended up joining the bandits. To see what the emperor will do, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Song Jiang comes tantalizingly close to seeing his dream come true. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!