

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 110.

Last time, Marshal Gao Qiu set about building a fleet and a navy for the third time in his quest to vanquish the outlaws of Liangshan. Despite some harassment from the bandits at his shipyard, he managed to build 300-some large and small vessels powered by paddle wheels, designed specifically to navigate the marsh around Liangshan. Gao Qiu then staged a demonstration, where he and his officers were all wowed by their new toys.

After offering sacrifices to the water gods, Gao Qiu and his men all boarded the ships, along with the singing and dancing girls that he had brought from the capital when he set out on campaign. They threw a huge feast on the ships while watching their soldiers show off their skills. As the ships glided across the water, music and songs blared from the deck. They partied deep into the night and slept on the ships. Then they woke up and partied some more the next day, and the next day. The feast went on for three straight days, and they were having such a good time that they didn't want to get off the ships.

Suddenly, a party-crashing report arrived. Apparently the bandits had posted a poem on a temple inside the Jizhou prefectural seat, and someone brought it to Gao Qiu. Now, depending on which version of the novel you're reading, the first couple lines of this poem are different. In the 100-chapter version, it goes:

We will capture Yang Jian (4) and Gao Qiu,
And mop up the prefectures of the Central Plain.
Even if you have 10,000 giant ships,
In the marsh they will all perish in vain.

But in the 120-chapter version, the first couple lines rub it in Gao Qiu's face even more. That version goes something like:

Gao Qiu that good-for-nothing got his break,
Neglecting his duties, on the water he does entertain.

Even if you have 10,000 giant ships,
In the marsh they will all perish in vain.

Personally, I liked that second version better, but Gao Qiu did not care for either version. In fact, he flew into a rage after reading it and declared, "If I don't exterminate all these bandits, I swear I will NOT retreat!"

His strategist Wen (2) Huanzhang (4,1) advised him to calm down. "Marshal, please check your thunderous rage for the moment," he said. "Those bandits must be afraid. That's why they wrote this trash talk. It's of no concern. Just wait a few days. Once our army and navy are ready, we will have plenty of time to attack. Right now it's the height of winter, yet the weather is mild. That is thanks to his majesty's good fortune and your lordship's prowess."

That little bit of bootlicking appeased Gao Qiu, and he returned to the prefectural seat to discuss how to deploy his forces. So, Liangshan had been surrounded on all sides by the marsh. But recently, Song Jiang had constructed a road leading to the front of the mountain. This was the only land route to and from the bandits' stronghold. So Gao Qiu now sent a couple of his commandants to lead an army of 10,000 to block that road in case any bandits try to come down the mountain that way. Then, Gao Qiu himself, along with all his other commandants, generals, and lieutenants, as well as strategist Wen (2) and the shipbuilder Ye Chun, would all board the ships and advance through the marsh.

Strategist Wen, however, told him, "Commander, you should stay on land and oversee the army's advance. You must not lead the fleet and put yourself in danger."

"It's fine," Gao Qiu said. "In the last two engagements, we lost tons of men and ships because I didn't have capable commanders to oversee the fleet. Now we have built such great ships. If I don't personally oversee the fleet, how can we capture those bandits? This time, I must settle the score with those outlaws! Not another word from you!"

With that command, Strategist Wen did not dare to say anything else, and just followed Gao Qiu onto the ships. Gao Qiu dispatched 30 large ships to serve as the vanguard, commanded by two commandants and Qiu (1) Yue (4), one of the two generals who came here as reinforcement. He then assigned 50 small ships to go in front of the vanguard to chart the course, and these were commanded by another commandant and Ye Chun, the guy who oversaw the ship construction. On the prow of each ship, they erected two large red banners, which said, "Roil the seas, stir the rivers, and churn the waves; pacify the realm, protect the state, and vanquish the demons."

In the center of the fleet Gao Qiu, Strategist Wen, and a whole host of officers kept watch over about 50 ships, brimming with banners, canopies, and weapons. But even now, Gao Qiu had to bring his singers and dancers along. You know, priorities. Meanwhile, two more commandants oversaw the rear of the fleet.

It was the middle of the 11th month when they set out. The army advanced first, and then the navy's vanguard wheeled out, with its three commanding officers watching from the prow of their ships. As they advanced, they deployed the small ships to block the small waterways that connected to the main thoroughfare to guard against any surprise attacks, while the large ships glided along the main channel.

As they ventured deep into the marsh, they saw a cluster of boats approaching from the distance. Each boat carried about 15 people, all wearing light armor. The three boats in the front each carried a white banner that said, "The three heroes of the Ruan clan". These were the three Ruan brothers. From the distance, it looked as though they and their men were all wearing shimmering gold and silver armor. But in reality, their "armor" was just gold and silver paper that had been glued on.

The three vanguard commanders of the imperial navy saw this bandit fleet approaching and immediately ordered their ships to let fly with various fiery projectiles. But the Ruan brothers showed no fear as they approached. As soon as they came within reach of the imperial navy's shots, however, the bandits all dove into the water and disappeared.

Having captured three empty boats, the imperial vanguard pressed on. They had not gone a mile when they saw three more fast boats approaching with the wind at their back, each carrying a dozen or so men, with their bodies covered in blue, yellow, and red powder. Their hair was hanging loose, and they were whistling as they approached. These three boats were led by the chieftains Meng (4) Kang (1) the Jade Flagpole, and the two Tong (2) brothers, Tong Wei (1) the Cave-Emerging Dragon and Tong Meng (3), the River-Churning Clam.

Once again, the imperial vanguard let loose with its fiery projectiles, and once again, the bandit chieftains quickly abandoned ship and swam away. So the imperial navy captured three more empty boats and continued.

Another mile later, three more boats approached, again each carrying a dozen or so bandits. These were led by Li Jun (4) the River Dragon, and the Zhang brothers, Zhang Heng (2) the Boat Flame and Zhang Shun (4) the White Streak in the Waves. As they approached, they shouted to the imperial navy, "Thank you for delivering these ships to our marsh!"

The vanguard commanders were in no mood to joke around, and immediately ordered their men to fire arrows. Once again, the three chieftains dove into the water. Nobody on the imperial ships entertained thoughts of chasing them into the water, especially not in the middle of winter.

Just then, a string of cannon shots blasted out from the top of the mountain, and hundreds of small boats shot out from the reeds all around the imperial navy, flying across the water like a flock of locusts. Each boat carried about five people and some unknown cargo. The imperial navy tried to ram these little boats with their big ships, but were easily outmaneuvered. Then, when the big ships tried to power up their wheel paddles, they found that the wheels were all stuck. As it turns out, the bandits had mounted numerous obstructions at the bottom of this stretch of the marsh, and wheels on the big ships were

jammed against these obstructions. Meanwhile, even though the archers on the big ships' towers kept firing, the bandits on the little boats easily blocked their shots with bamboo shields.

And now, the small bandit boats closed in on the big ships. A barrage of grappling hooks flew through the air and took hold of the ships' tillers. At the same time, the bandits started hacking at the soldiers who were peddling the boats with their knives. Soon, dozens of bandits had boarded the imperial ships. The imperial navy tried to retreat, but their path was blocked.

Just as the front of the imperial fleet was descending into chaos, the rear of the imperial fleet also started shouting. Marshal Gao Qiu and Strategist Wen were on a ship in the center of the fleet. When they heard all hell breaking loose, they tried to flee onto land. But just then, they heard the thunderous sound of drums echoing from the reeds, and their soldiers started yelling, "The ship is leaking!"

Sure enough, water started pouring into the cabins of numerous ships, and the vessels started sinking one after another. This was the doing of the chieftain Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. After he jumped off his own boat, he and a gang of skilled swimmers dove underwater and used hammers and chisels to puncture the hull of the imperial vessels.

Now, as his fleet was going under, Marshal Gao could see all the small bandit boats flocking toward his ship like a swarm of ants. He climbed onto the tower of his ship and cried for help from the rear of his fleet. Suddenly, a man leaped out from the water and climbed up to the tower, saying, "Marshal, I'll save you!"

Gao Qiu took a look but did not recognize this man. Before he could react, the guy had grabbed him with two hands, yelled, "Down you go!", and chucked him into the marsh. This was none other than Zhang Shun, and as soon as Gao Qiu splashed down, two small bandit boats flew over and yanked him out of the water.

While Gao Qiu was busy getting himself captured, his vanguard was engulfed in chaos. One of the vanguard commanders, the general Qiu Yue (4), hurriedly looked for a way out. But before he could flee, the chieftain Yang Lin the Multi-colored Leopard caught him offguard and cut him down, sending his corpse into the marsh. The other two vanguard commanders came forward to attack Yang Lin, but soon found themselves swarmed by a host of other chieftains, and both were easily captured alive.

As the imperial navy was being wiped out for the third time, the imperial army had its hands full as well. Gao Qiu had dispatched his army to go guard the only road leading to and from Liangshan. But the bandits sent an army led by their No. 2, Lu Junyi the Jade Qilin, to remove this roadblock. After some prerequisite trash talk, Lu Junyi traded blows with one of the army's commanders, Zhou Ang (2). They fought for 20-some bouts without a winner, but then a swarm of bandits sprang out from hiding, led by the chieftains Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, Lin Chong the Panther Head, and Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs. The generals and commandants leading the imperial army were no match for this onslaught, and they all fled back to Jizhou Prefecture and hid inside the city while sending out scouts to see what happened to their navy and their boss.

Back in the marsh, Song Jiang, having captured Marshal Gao, immediately ordered Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to send word to all the bandits that they were not to harm any imperial soldiers, or well, any MORE imperial soldiers anyway. They did, however, capture Gao Qiu's strategist, Wen Huanzhang (4,1), as well as his troupe of singers and dancers. And then, they all returned to base.

Song Jiang and the rest of the Liangshan hive mind were waiting in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor when the chieftain Zhang Shun brought in a dripping wet Gao Qiu. As soon as Song Jiang saw this, he rushed from his seat to help steady Gao Qiu and ordered his men to bring the prisoner a fresh change of clothes. He then asked Gao Qiu to take the center seat, while he kneeled and kowtowed. Ah man! You're gonna pull that routine with THIS guy?! Seriously?!

“We deserve death!” Song Jiang said as he continued to kowtow.

Gao Qiu hurriedly returned the courtesy, but Song Jiang told Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng to help him to his feet. They bowed to him again, and then asked him to sit. Song Jiang then told Yan Qing the prodigy to send out word to all the bandits, “Anyone who kills another person will be punished severely.”

Soon, a parade of prisoners were brought in, including a number of captured commandants, as well as the heads of a few dead ones who were killed in action before the no-kill order went out. You know, the static was so bad on this end that we really couldn’t make out what that order was. Among the slain was Qiu Yue, one of the generals sent to provide reinforcements, and Ye Chun, the guy who gave Gao Qiu the brilliant idea for building these wheel-paddle ships. The only guys who got away were the four officers commanding the army.

Song Jiang ordered that all the prisoners were given a fresh set of clothes and then invited them all back to the hall to sit and be slain with kindness. All the imperial soldiers that were captured were released back to Jizhou Prefecture. The singers and dancers were put on a nice ship and put under protection.

Then, it was party time. Song Jiang threw a huge party to reward his troops. He also assembled all the chieftains to come pay their respects to Gao Qiu, which I can only imagine delighted them all to no end. After some no-doubt awkward greetings, Song Jiang had Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng hold a bottle of wine and pour, Lu Junyi stand in attendance, and he personally offered a cup of wine to Gao Qiu, saying, “I am a lowly magisterial clerk and convict. How would I ever dare to rebel against the imperial court? It’s just that I had too many offenses piled up, and thus had no choice but to act as I did. Even though we were twice honored by his majesty’s benevolence, there was some wicked villainy at work each time that corrupted the mission. It’s impossible to explain. I pray that your lordship will exercise compassion and help save us from this trap. If we can see the sky again, your kindness will be engraved on my bones, and I will repay you with my life.”

Even as Song Jiang was saying all this, Gao Qiu could see that everybody else was pretty pissed, including some old personal enemies like Lin Chong the Panther Head and Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast, who looked like they were about to act out.

“Song Jiang, don’t worry!” Gao Qiu said. “When I return to court, I will definitely inform the emperor and ask him to grant you amnesty, reward you handsomely, and give you official posts. All you men of honor will enjoy the emperor’s favor and become respectable officials.”

Song Jiang was delighted, even if nobody else was. He bowed to thank Gao Qiu, and then threw a banquet to welcome him. The novel said all the chieftains took their turn offering toasts to Gao Qiu, but I’m more inclined to read that as all the chieftains were compelled to offer toasts to Gao Qiu. Either way, Gao Qiu got stinkin’ drunk and started running his mouth.

“I learned how to wrestle in my youth, and I have no equal in the land,” he boasted.

Lu Junyi was also getting tipsy, and when he heard that, he pointed to Yan Qing the Prodigy and said, “That brother of mine also knows how to wrestle. He has competed in major tournaments three times and has no equal.”

Gao Qiu now rose, removed his robe, and challenged Yan Qing to a wrestling match. Now, all the chieftains were just humoring Gao Qiu and letting him run his mouth because, hey, the boss told us to behave. But now, this scumbag was challenging Yan Qing to a wrestling match? I mean, he was practically begging for a butt-whupping, and you can’t say no to the VIP, right? So everyone now chimed in and said, yeah, let’s see a wrestling match! Song Jiang was also too drunk to push back, so he just went with it.

Gao Qiu and Yan Qing now both removed their shirts. Song Jiang ordered men to put down some soft padding on the floor of the hall, and the two contestants squared off. Gao Qiu charged at Yan Qing, but Yan Qing quickly grabbed him, and with one move, threw him to the ground so hard that Gao Qiu couldn’t get up for a good while.

Song Jiang and Lu Junyi hurriedly helped Gao Qiu to his feet and helped him get dressed, and joked, "Marshal, you're drunk, so how can you win a wrestling match? Please don't get mad. Forgive us."

Gao Qiu had learned his lesson and just kept his mouth shut. They resumed drinking and went deep into the night before they retired.

The next day, Song Jiang threw another feast to put Gao Qiu at ease. But Gao Qiu now asked to take his leave.

"We have no ulterior motives in keeping your lordship here," Song Jiang said. "If we did, may heaven and earth smite us!"

"Heroes," Gao Qiu said, "if you can let me go back to the capital, I will vouch for you to the emperor on the lives of my entire family. I guarantee that I will convince him to grant you amnesty and to put your talents to good use for the state. If I go back on my words, heaven and earth shall not tolerate me, and I will be riddled by spears and arrows!"

More than a few guys in attendance were probably eager to help Gao Qiu with that last part, but Song Jiang continued to play the obsequious card. He bowed and thanked Gao Qiu, who then told him, "If you don't believe me, you can keep my officers as hostages."

So now, there were probably a few more guys in attendance who were ready to riddle Gao Qiu with spears and arrows. But Song Jiang told him, "Marshal, how would a man of high rank such as yourself go back on your word? There's no need to leave your officers as hostages. Allow us to prepare horses and saddles and send you all back to your base."

"In that case, you have my sincere thanks, and I will take my leave of you now," Gao Qiu quickly replied.

Song Jiang tried time and again to keep him longer, and they threw another big feast in his honor. This went on for three more days, and on the third day, Gao Qiu insisted on leaving, and Song Jiang

finally relented and there a going-away party, where he presented Gao Qiu with several thousand taels of gold as a going-away present. All the other captured officers also were presented with fancy gifts. Gao Qiu and company tried to decline but could not, and so they oh so reluctantly pocketed all that gold and silver.

As they drank, Song Jiang again brought up the matter of amnesty. Gao Qiu told him, “Hero, you can send a smart man to go with me. I will take him to see the emperor so that he can inform his majesty about your true story, and that will make it easier to get a decree of amnesty.”

Song Jiang wanted amnesty oh so badly, so he and Wu Yong discussed and decided to send two chieftains with Gao Qiu. These were Xiao (1) Rang (4) the Sacred-Handed Scholar and Yue (4) He (2) the Iron Whistle, two of the more respectable looking chieftains.

Gao Qiu now said, “Since you are entrusting me with this, I will leave Strategist Wen here as a sign of my sincerity.”

Song Jiang was delighted, and I can only imagine Strategist Wen going ah crap in his head. In any case, the next day, Song Jiang and Wu Yong, along with 20-some riders, escorted Gao Qiu and company down the mountain, sailed across the marsh, and saw them off for another six or seven miles before parting ways. Song Jiang then returned to base to await good news.

Ok, so, that was probably as anti-climactic a sequence as you could imagine, what with our heroes finally getting his hands on the guy who had done so many of them so wrong. I mean, Lin Chong in particular would probably have liked nothing more than to cut out Gao Qiu’s heart and eat it raw. But all we got from the novel was one line saying he looked pissed. This always felt like a missed opportunity for drama. In fact, in the TV shows based on the novel, there was always some huge blow-up between Lin Chong and Song Jiang over this. But in the novel, this was barely a thing, which is just ... disappointing.

Anyway, Gao Qiu and his officers now slinked back to Jizhou Prefecture, where the four officers who escaped the debacle, along with Prefect Zhang, welcomed him back. Gao Qiu stayed in the city for a few days, regrouped his army, and told his commandants to lead their respective troops and return to their posts to await future orders. Gao Qiu then led the main army and headed back to the capital, along with the chieftains Xiao Rang and Yue He.

Back on Liangshan, Song Jiang was discussing the situation with his chieftains. He said, "I don't know if Gao Qiu will actually make good on his word."

The strategist Wu Yong laughed and was like, dude, are you serious? You're not sure?

"In my view," Wu Yong said, "This man has the eyes of a wasp and the countenance of a snake. He's the kind of ingrate who will forget your kindness as soon as he turns around. He lost a ton of troops and squandered a lot of provisions. When he returns to the capital, he will no doubt pretend to be sick and stay home, and try to keep this news from the emperor while his troops rest. He will keep Xiao Rang and Yue He effectively under house arrest in his home. Waiting for amnesty would be futile."

"What then?" Song Jiang asked. "We can't get an amnesty, and two of our brothers are trapped."

"Brother, send another two sharp ones to the capital with lots of gold to conduct recon," Wu Yong suggested. "They can find an opportunity to report our intentions to the emperor. Then, Marshal Gao would not be able to keep this under wraps. That's the best course of action."

Yan Qing the Prodigy now rose and said, "Last year, when we caused a ruckus in the capital, I was the one who made the connection with the courtesan Li (3) Shishi (1,1). After the mess we caused, she probably could guess who we were. But she's the emperor's lover, so he would never suspect her. She probably just told him that we caused a ruckus at her house to scare the emperor because we knew he would be there. Let me go see her again with lots of gold and jewels. Pillow talk is the quickest way to get to the emperor. I can act as the situation dictates and capitalize on any opportunities."

“Ok, but you might run into danger,” Song Jiang cautioned.

Dai Zong the Magic Traveler now volunteered to go with Yan Qing. Meanwhile, Zhu Wu, the associate strategist, reminded Song Jiang of another connection they had in the capital.

“Brother, when you were attacking Huazhou (2,1) Prefecture, you did a favor for Marshal Su (4),” Zhu Wu said. “He’s a good-hearted man. If we can get him to speak to the emperor in our favor, that could also succeed.”

So, in case you forgot, this Marshal Su was on his way to offer sacrifices at a temple in Huazhou Prefecture as commanded by the emperor. The “favor” that Song Jiang did for him was to hijack his ship, “borrow” his regalia so that the bandits could disguise themselves as government envoys, catch the local authorities offguard, slaughter them all, and rescue two of their own chieftains from prison. And then they gave the marshal all his stuff back, said “thanks for the loan”, and left him to clean up the mess and explain what happened to the emperor. So ... umm ... yeah, I’m sure that guy is just DYING to repay your ... favor.

But Song Jiang now also remembered one of the lines of divine prophecy that he received from his run-in with a goddess. It said, “Happiness will follow when you find lodging,” in which the character for “lodging” was the same as the character in Marshal Su’s last name. So maybe this was worth looking into.

To see how many “favors” the bandits will need to call in to get a little face time with the emperor, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Yan Qing gets a little one-on-one time with the emperor’s main squeeze. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!