

---

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Gratitude, Justice, and Survival: Conceptions of Loyalty and Righteousness among Minor Characters in *Water Margin*****He Wenzhuo***School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China 999077***Corresponding Author:** He Wenzhuo, **E-mail:** [lnszlhy@163.com](mailto:lnszlhy@163.com)

---

**ABSTRACT**

The theme of loyalty and righteousness in *Water Margin*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, has long attracted scholarly attention. Most studies, however, focus on major figures such as Song Jiang, Lin Chong, Wu Song, Lu Zhishen, and Li Kui, giving less attention to minor characters who appear infrequently and occupy relatively little narrative space. These characters' understandings of loyalty and righteousness are more than secondary versions of those expressed by the novel's leading figures. They emerge through three interrelated dimensions: gratitude and obligation, justice, and survival. Gratitude and obligation concern the personal duty to repay kindness; justice concerns public fairness and the basic demands of conscience; survival provides both the practical context and the underlying impetus for moral choices in a time of disorder. On this basis, the loyalty and righteousness of minor characters can be understood in three forms: those rooted in gratitude, those grounded in justice, and those directed toward the dynasty and country. These forms extend from private relationships to public concerns and from individuals to communities, while frequently overlapping in particular struggles for survival. Together, they enrich the novel's treatment of loyalty and righteousness and reveal the diversity and complexity of these values in traditional Chinese culture.

**KEYWORDS**

*Water Margin*; minor characters; loyalty and righteousness; gratitude and obligation; justice; survival

**ARTICLE INFORMATION****ACCEPTED:** 21 September 2026**PUBLISHED:** 21 October 2026**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.10.27

---

**1. Introduction**

*Water Margin* is the first full-length vernacular novel in Chinese literary history to take a peasant uprising as its subject. Set against the historical background of Song Jiang's rebellion in the late Northern Song dynasty, it follows the 108 heroes of Liangshan from their gathering at the mountain stronghold through their acceptance of an imperial amnesty, their campaigns against the Liao and Fang La, and their eventual downfall. In doing so, it offers a penetrating account of the social conflicts of the time and the people's spirit of resistance. Since its appearance, the novel's vivid episodes, distinctive characters, and depth of thought have won it a wide readership and an enduring place in the Chinese literary canon. Loyalty and righteousness run throughout the work. From Song Jiang, the "Timely Rain," and Lu Zhishen, the "Tattooed Monk," to Wu Song, the "Pilgrim," and Li Kui, the "Black Whirlwind," the conduct of the Liangshan heroes gives expression to these ideals. As the Ming thinker Li Zhi writes in his "Preface to Reading *The Complete Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness*":

"*Water Margin* was written out of indignation. ... Although Shi and Luo lived under the Yuan, their hearts remained with the Song. Born in the Yuan, they were nevertheless outraged by what had happened to the Song. Angered by the capture of the two emperors and their removal to the north, they gave vent to that anger by describing a great victory over the Liao. Angered by the court's retreat south and its willingness to settle for a precarious peace, they gave vent to it by describing the defeat of Fang La. And who, we may ask, are the agents of this indignation? The very outlaws who had earlier gathered by the water's edge. We cannot help but call them loyal and righteous."<sup>1</sup>

In Li Zhi's view, the authors' purpose was to portray loyalty and righteousness. The victories over the Liao and Fang La allowed them to express their indignation through the Liangshan heroes. He therefore regarded these heroes as embodiments of loyalty and righteousness, as reflected in the title *Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness*.

Scholarship on loyalty and righteousness in *Water Margin* has largely concentrated on Song Jiang, Lin Chong, Wu Song, Lu Zhishen, and Li Kui, establishing an approach centered on the novel's major characters. Yet minor characters far outnumber the protagonists. They come from every level of society, from ordinary people to court officials, and together create a richly varied social world. Although they receive neither elaborate characterization nor accounts of spectacular heroism, the loyalty and righteousness they display at decisive moments deserve careful consideration.

In this article, "minor characters" refers to figures who carry relatively little narrative weight in *Water Margin*. Their stories do not form part of the novel's principal narrative, and their appearances are both infrequent and brief. Rather than standing at the center of major episodes, they play supporting roles, providing the circumstances for the protagonists' actions or helping to advance the plot.

"Gratitude and obligation" (*enyi*) refers here primarily to personal kindness and the ethical duty to repay it. "Justice" (*gongdao*) denotes demands for fairness, conscience, and order that extend beyond private relationships. "Survival" (*shengcun*) encompasses both the continuation of physical life and the efforts of individuals and communities to secure a place for themselves in a troubled world. These are three dimensions through which to understand the moral outlook of minor characters, rather than three parallel categories. Their choices often begin with gratitude, remain grounded in a sense of justice, and, under the pressures of survival, come to embrace a broader duty to the dynasty and country.

## 2. The meaning of loyalty and righteousness in *Water Margin*

In pre-Qin texts, *zhong*, or loyalty, encompasses obligations to rulers, friends, and the state. The *Zuo Commentary*, in its account of the first year of Duke Zhao, states: "To remember one's state in the face of danger is loyalty."<sup>2</sup> This is understood as loyalty to the ruler. Confucius says, "Be respectful in private conduct, attentive in carrying out your duties, and faithful in dealing with others. Even among foreign peoples, these principles must not be abandoned" (*Analects*, "Zilu").<sup>3</sup> Here, loyalty means treating others sincerely and keeping one's word. Confucius also maintains that "a ruler should employ his ministers according to ritual propriety, and ministers should serve their ruler with loyalty."<sup>4</sup> The ruler's observance of propriety toward his subordinates and their loyalty in return establish an appropriate ethical order. Pre-Qin thinkers explained *yi*, or righteousness, through the idea of what is fitting or appropriate, giving it such philosophical meanings as morality, moral duty, justice, and rectitude.<sup>5</sup> The *Analects*, in "Liren," states: "The exemplary person understands righteousness; the petty person understands profit."<sup>6</sup> Righteousness here belongs to the moral sphere and refers to conduct that accords with what is right. The term also frequently describes the ethics of relations between ruler and minister: "The affairs of human relationships, between ruler and minister and between father and son, are called righteousness" (*Guanzi*, "Xinshu I").<sup>7</sup> Thus, *yi* defines the moral quality of ethical relationships; it is not simply another name for any one particular relationship.<sup>8</sup>

The two terms *zhong* and *yi* first appear together in the "Qishi" chapter of Wang Chong's *Lunheng*:<sup>9</sup> "It is said that people of earlier times valued righteousness above their own lives. When confronted with a matter of loyalty and righteousness, and when they clearly understood that duty required their death, they would plunge into boiling water or charge into the blades of weapons, dying without regret. The integrity of Hong Yan and the righteousness of Chen Buzhan are comparable examples. The records contain many such people who gave up their lives."<sup>10</sup> Grieving for Duke Yi of Wei, Hong Yan cut open his own abdomen and placed the duke's liver inside it.<sup>11</sup> Chen Buzhan, though timid by nature, went to his ruler's aid and died of fright.<sup>12</sup> Both died in the service of their state and ruler, exemplifying the loyalty expected of a minister.

The meaning of loyalty and righteousness became more firmly established with the appearance of *Water Margin*. In the Rongyutang edition of *Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness*, Ye Zhou describes Lu Da, Li Kui, Shi Xiu, and others as "truly loyal and righteous, true heroes." Li Zhi writes, "Whenever I encounter accounts of loyal ministers and men of principle from antiquity, I am moved to tears; I therefore always welcome stories of loyalty and righteousness in the world."<sup>13</sup> His understanding of these virtues embraces both loyalty to the ruler and solidarity among companions. Yuan Wuya's edition of *The Complete Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness* puts it this way: "Loyal to their sovereign, they hate treacherous ministers; bound by righteousness, the brothers take refuge together. Had loyalty and righteousness not united their hearts, how could all 108 have gathered as one?"<sup>14</sup> The Liangshan heroes remain loyal to the Song emperor and hate the corrupt ministers who harm the country. Bound by brotherhood, they gather at Liangshan to seek temporary refuge. Their shared commitment to loyalty and righteousness makes it possible for all 108 to unite in a common cause. This offers a particularly clear account of the novel's understanding of these values. The "Editorial Principles for the Illustrated and Annotated Complete *Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness*" states: "Loyalty and righteousness are the virtues by which one serves a ruler and treats one's friends. Without them, a person is already morally dead while still alive, and even beautiful words will not endure. These 108 men are loyalty and righteousness gathered in the forests; these 120 chapters are loyalty and righteousness made visible in writing."<sup>15</sup>

At the heart of *Water Margin's* conception of loyalty and righteousness, then, are allegiance to the ruler and moral obligation toward friends. These are the fundamental principles governing service to a sovereign and relations among companions: *zhong* defines the minister's duty to the ruler, while *yi* defines the duties that bind brothers and friends.<sup>16</sup> Steadfast in their loyalty and united in their hatred of treacherous officials, the heroes rely on one another and remain together through the bonds of righteousness. The 108 men gathered at Liangshan embody these virtues in their forest refuge. The novel devotes extensive attention to this moral spirit, and it is their shared commitment to it that makes their fellowship possible.

### **3. Forms of loyalty and righteousness among minor characters**

Most minor characters in *Water Margin* have endured difficult lives. Some are driven by poverty into the world of wandering outlaws; others are left with nowhere to turn after suffering oppression; still others become involved in the Liangshan uprising through chance encounters. Their loyalty and righteousness take shape through everyday conduct, difficult choices, and commitments maintained in the face of death. They offer neither moral lectures nor grand political declarations, but express these values in the direct and unassuming ways of ordinary people. Whereas leading figures such as Song Jiang and Lin Chong enact their ideals collectively by "gathering at Liangshan in righteousness" and "acting on Heaven's behalf," minor characters tend to express them in individual, practical, and understated ways.

Differences in motivation, the objects of moral commitment, and ethical scope allow these expressions of loyalty and righteousness to be grouped into three broad forms, understood through the dimensions of gratitude, justice, and survival. The first is rooted in gratitude: it arises from personal kindness and remains within the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, reflecting an ethic of mutual aid among people struggling to survive. The second is grounded in justice: it derives from conscience and a commitment to what is right, exists independently of obligations to any particular person, and upholds the basic conditions of survival under oppression. The third is directed toward the dynasty and country: it rests on political allegiance and a commitment to the common good, with the stability of the state and its people as its ultimate concern. It extends the ethics of individual survival to the survival of a community and, ultimately, to the maintenance of political order. These forms move from private to public concerns and from the individual to the collective, but they do not constitute a simple linear progression. They overlap within particular circumstances and together form the moral world of the novel's minor characters.

#### **3.1 Loyalty rooted in gratitude: Repaying kindness and helping one another survive**

Loyalty and righteousness rooted in gratitude begin as a direct response to kindness and are directed toward a particular benefactor. They belong to the ethics of personal relationships and are captured in the saying, "Repay a drop of kindness with a flowing spring." People at the bottom of society lack the means to transform their world or rescue others from hardship. What they can do is repay, as fully as their circumstances allow, those who have helped them. Though limited in scope, this form of righteousness is sincere and unalloyed. It is an ethic of mutual aid in difficult circumstances: one person offers help in a moment of danger, and the other responds with loyalty, fidelity, or even the sacrifice of life.

##### **3.1.1 Old Jin and Jin Cuilian**

Old Jin and his daughter, Jin Cuilian, are ordinary residents of Weizhou. Their abuse at the hands of Butcher Zheng, known as the "Lord of the West," leaves them with nowhere to turn. When Lu Zhishen learns of their plight, he gives them fifteen taels of silver for their journey and personally escorts them out of Weizhou. He tells Old Jin, "You two stay here. I'll go and kill that scoundrel, then come back!"<sup>17</sup>

Father and daughter are deeply grateful to Lu Zhishen for saving them. After leaving Weizhou, they settle in Yanmen County, where Jin Cuilian becomes the concubine of a wealthy local man, Squire Zhao, and their lives gradually become more secure. Lu Zhishen later flees to Yanmen himself, pursued by the authorities for killing Butcher Zheng. Recognizing him in the street, Old Jin immediately takes him home and offers him hospitality. He also introduces him to Squire Zhao and helps arrange for him to enter a monastery on Mount Wutai, where he can find refuge. Although Old Jin and his daughter possess little wealth or influence, they repay Lu Zhishen in the ways available to them. Their gratitude exemplifies the righteousness celebrated in *Water Margin*: a sincere desire to repay kindness, free of calculation or self-interest. Their actions show that even the humblest people can possess the highest moral qualities.

##### **3.1.2 Li Xiao'er**

In his earlier years in the Eastern Capital, Li Xiao'er was caught stealing money from his employer, who intended to hand him over to the authorities. Taking pity on him, Lin Chong intervened, spared him prosecution, and gave him money to get away. Li later opens a tavern in Cangzhou, where he encounters Lin Chong after the latter has been exiled there. Li and his wife look after him attentively: they "often brought soup and drinks to the camp for Lin Chong" and "took his clothes home to wash, starch, and mend."<sup>18</sup> When Officer Lu and his accomplices arrive in Cangzhou and plot to murder Lin Chong, Li Xiao'er happens to overhear them. He tells his wife, "There's something suspicious about those two," and asks her to "go behind the partition and listen to

what they're saying."<sup>19</sup> Realizing that they are plotting against Lin Chong, he quickly warns him. This timely warning enables Lin Chong to save his own life by killing Officer Lu and the others in the Mountain God's Temple during a snowstorm.

Li Xiao'er acts entirely out of gratitude to Lin Chong for having saved him. He knows that, if his actions are discovered, he too will be implicated. Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to deliver the warning, putting into practice the principle of repaying even a small kindness many times over.

### **3.1.3 Shi Yong**

Shi Yong, nicknamed the "Stone General," begins as a gambler who kills a man with a single blow during a gambling dispute. Forced to flee, he eventually reaches Chai Jin's estate in Cangzhou. Chai Jin takes pity on him and gives him shelter, food, and clothing, thereby saving his life. Song Jiang later seeks refuge at the same estate after killing Yan Poxi in a fit of anger, and Shi Yong gets to know him there. Song Jiang subsequently returns home on business, while Shi Yong remains with Chai Jin. Several months later, Song Jiang's father asks Song Qing to take his brother a letter calling him home. Song Jiang is then staying at Old Master Kong's estate with Wu Yong and others, so Song Qing entrusts the letter to Shi Yong. Traveling tirelessly across prefectures and counties and making inquiries along the way, Shi Yong finally finds Song Jiang in a tavern and places the letter in his hands.

Shi Yong's efforts express his gratitude to Chai Jin for sheltering him and saving his life, as well as his commitment to carrying out a task entrusted to him. His conduct embodies the principles that kindness must be repaid and a promise is worth its weight in gold.

### **3.1.4 Bai Sheng**

Bai Sheng is an idler from Anle Village in Jizhou Prefecture who has previously received help from Chao Gai. In gratitude, he joins the plot to seize the convoy of birthday gifts. On Yellow Mud Ridge, he poses as a wine seller and uses a sleeping drug to incapacitate Yang Zhi and his men, allowing the gifts to be taken. Later arrested by the authorities, he is brutally tortured, "beaten three or four times until his flesh split open and blood streamed out."<sup>20</sup> Despite this treatment, he never names the six other ringleaders besides Chao Gai. After Chao Gai and his companions reach Liangshan, they immediately send men to free him from prison. Once rescued, Bai Sheng devotes himself wholeheartedly to the Liangshan heroes. He gathers intelligence, carries messages, and accompanies the army on numerous campaigns, contributing to the Liangshan cause.

Bai Sheng initially joins the robbery to repay Chao Gai's earlier assistance. Lowly in status and habitually idle, he nevertheless holds to a moral boundary when official torture puts his life at risk, refusing to betray the brothers who have acted alongside him. Although he briefly experiences fear and uncertainty, his willingness to endure punishment rather than turn against his companions ultimately preserves the pledge of their brotherhood. His conduct expresses a simple ethic among ordinary people: having received someone's kindness, one must not betray that person, even at the cost of one's life.

## **3.2 Loyalty grounded in justice: Conscience and the conditions of survival**

Loyalty and righteousness grounded in justice arise from the individual's conscience and are directed toward moral principle, fairness, and what is right. They belong to the realm of generally applicable ethical obligations and may be summarized as acting from conviction and holding fast to justice. They do not depend on personal ties, and they allow a person to maintain basic moral standards even under oppression. For minor characters, justice is more than an abstract value: it is the last safeguard of an order in which ordinary life remains possible.

### **3.2.1 Yun Ge**

Yun Ge is a pear seller in Yanggu County, only fifteen or sixteen years old. Quick-witted and possessed of a strong sense of justice, he wants to tell Wu Dalang when he discovers the affair between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian. To stop him, Granny Wang beats him, curses him, and drives him away. Indignant, Yun Ge finds Wu Dalang, tells him about the affair, and helps devise a plan to catch the lovers together. He says, "Here's what you should do. Go home a little later today. Don't make a scene or let anything show on your face; just act as you always do. Tomorrow, make fewer steamed cakes to sell. I'll wait at the entrance to the lane, and if I see Ximen Qing go in, I'll come and get you. Take your carrying pole and wait for me nearby."<sup>21</sup> With Yun Ge's help, Wu Dalang catches Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian in the act. Although Wu Dalang ultimately dies from the injuries inflicted by Ximen Qing's kick, Yun Ge's actions reveal a young person's spirited determination to stand up against injustice. Despite his youth, he refuses to be intimidated by wrongdoing and dares to demand what is right.

### **3.2.2 He Jiushu**

He Jiushu is the head undertaker in Yanggu County, responsible for local funeral arrangements. When Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing poison Wu Dalang, He Jiushu is called to prepare the body. He observes that "the face was purplish black, blood was seeping from the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth, and faint tooth marks showed around the lips. He had certainly died of poison."<sup>22</sup> Knowing how powerful Ximen Qing is in Yanggu, He Jiushu dares not speak out immediately. Yet he does not ignore his conscience. He secretly keeps a fragment of Wu Dalang's bone and the ten taels of silver Ximen Qing has given him as evidence. He tells his wife,

"I meant to raise the alarm, but I feared there would be no one to stand up for me, and I would have made an enemy of Ximen Qing."<sup>23</sup> When Wu Song returns to avenge his brother, He Jiushu comes forward with the evidence and helps him establish the truth. He tells Wu Song, "I knew nothing of what had happened before. On the twenty-second day of the first month, I was at home when Granny Wang from the teahouse came to ask me to prepare Wu Dalang's body. As I reached the entrance to the lane on Zishi Street that day, Ximen Qing, who runs the pharmacy in front of the county office, stopped me and invited me to a tavern, where we drank a flask of wine. He took out these ten taels of silver, gave them to me, and said, 'When you prepare the body, make sure you cover everything up.'"<sup>24</sup>

He Jiushu is no fearless hero. He knows that Ximen Qing "controls the authorities and influences the courts." Offending him could cost He Jiushu his position or, worse, destroy his family. He therefore hesitates and initially draws back. Yet he never abandons his basic moral principles or becomes an accomplice to wrongdoing simply to protect himself. When the decisive moment arrives, he is able to act. His conduct combines prudent self-preservation with an enduring commitment to justice. He fears Ximen Qing's power but does not forget his conscience or his responsibilities. This persistence in a corrupt world is particularly valuable. His loyalty and righteousness take the form of an ordinary person's final defense of fairness under oppression, rather than a spectacular act of violent resistance.

### **3.2.3 Sun Ding**

Sun Ding, a judicial clerk in Kaifeng Prefecture known as "Sun the Buddha," is upright and kindhearted. He knows that Gao Qiu has framed Lin Chong. When Gao Qiu pressures the prefect to have Lin Chong executed, Sun Ding argues firmly on Lin Chong's behalf: "From Lin Chong's testimony, he is an innocent man."<sup>25</sup> He also tells the prefect, "Everyone knows that Grand Marshal Gao abuses his power and that his household stops at no wrongdoing. Anyone who gives him the slightest offense is sent here to Kaifeng, to be killed or cut to pieces at his whim. But this is not his private court!"<sup>26</sup> These words expose both Gao Qiu's arrogance and the corruption of the judicial system. Because Sun Ding persists, the prefect ultimately spares Lin Chong's life and instead sentences him to penal tattooing and exile in Cangzhou.

Sun Ding's intervention does more than save an individual life: it also defends the integrity of the law. As a clerk in Kaifeng, he fully understands that Gao Qiu's position as Grand Marshal gives him enormous influence over the court, and that opposing him will place his own safety at risk. Even so, he defends Lin Chong without hesitation. Among the officials portrayed in *Water Margin*, he is one of the few positive figures who remain committed to justice. His decision rests on both moral conscience and professional integrity. In a world darkened by corruption, he offers a small measure of hope and stands as one of the last guardians of legal authority against unchecked power.

## **3.3 Loyalty to the dynasty and country: Collective survival and the common good**

Loyalty and righteousness directed toward the dynasty and country arise from allegiance to the legitimate political order and identification with the country and its people. Their objects are the imperial court and the people of the realm. They extend beyond personal grievances and the interests of a small group to embrace a broader political and national duty. Their defining principles are loyalty to the ruler, service to the country, and concern for the welfare of all. This is the highest form of loyalty and righteousness expressed by the minor characters in *Water Margin*. It draws on the Confucian tradition, with its emphasis on the individual's allegiance to the state and the wider community.

This form of loyalty is closely connected with survival. It represents a broader choice available to minor characters when, amid disorder, individuals cannot protect themselves and communities lack a legitimate framework within which to live securely. Song Wan, Jiao Ting, and Tao Zongwang find a place within Liangshan, repay the community through faithful service, and ultimately give their lives for the country. Their ordinary efforts to secure a living thus acquire a wider moral significance. Wen Huanzhang's support for an imperial amnesty likewise seeks both a lawful future for the Liangshan community and an end to conflict within the country. Loyalty to the dynasty and country may therefore be understood as an ethical expansion from individual survival to collective survival and, finally, to national stability.

### **3.3.1 Jin Jie and Qin Yulan**

Jin Jie and his wife, Qin Yulan, exemplify this form of loyalty and righteousness. A deputy commander at Changzhou under Fang La, Jin Jie has long wished to return to Song allegiance. Recognizing the greater duty at stake, Qin Yulan urges him, "You have always valued loyalty and filial duty, and you have wanted to submit to the Song. Besides, you were once a Song official, and the court has done you no wrong. Why not abandon the wrongful cause and return to the rightful one? Capture Lü Shinang and deliver him to Commander Song. That would give you a way forward."<sup>27</sup> Persuaded by his wife, Jin Jie writes a letter and has it shot to Song Jiang by arrow, arranging a coordinated attack from inside and outside Changzhou. He subsequently helps the Song army take the city and returns to loyal service under the dynasty. The couple's actions express their recognition of Song legitimacy and their determination to "abandon the wrongful cause and return to the rightful one." Their judgment of Fang La's oppressive rule and the Song's rightful authority is both a political commitment and a strategy for survival: between the two regimes, they choose the side they believe can restore order.

### 3.3.2 Song Wan, Jiao Ting, and Tao Zongwang

Song Wan, nicknamed the “Guardian in the Clouds,” helps establish Liangshan alongside Zhu Gui and others. They are already leaders there under Wang Lun. After Chao Gai and Song Jiang arrive, they willingly yield precedence to more capable men and accept subordinate positions. Throughout Liangshan’s growth, they remain loyal and contribute without drawing attention to themselves. Tao Zongwang comes from an ordinary farming household. After joining Liangshan, he takes responsibility for practical work such as building fortifications and dredging waterways. Though he wins no spectacular military honors, he consistently fulfills his duties. Jiao Ting, known as “the Faceless,” comes from a family that has earned its living through wrestling for three generations. He becomes acquainted with Li Kui through a fight and follows him to Liangshan, where he ranks ninety-eighth. Despite his low rank, he serves diligently in the infantry, accompanies Song Jiang on campaigns, and repeatedly distinguishes himself in combat.

During the campaign against Fang La, Song Wan, Jiao Ting, and Tao Zongwang are “killed by arrows and trampled to death by horses” in the battle of Runzhou.<sup>28</sup> On hearing the news, Song Jiang laments, “We have only just crossed the river today, and already I have lost three more brothers. Song Wan may never have performed any extraordinary feat, but we owed him much when Liangshan was first established. Now he has gone to the world below!”<sup>29</sup> These three men are neither central figures at Liangshan nor celebrated military heroes. Yet they give their lives in loyalty to both Liangshan and the country, embodying a public duty expressed through faithful everyday service and sacrifice in the nation’s cause.

### 3.3.3 Wen Huanzhang

Wen Huanzhang, a native of the Eastern Capital, is learned and attentive to the greater good. After Gao Qiu recruits him as a military adviser, he repeatedly urges Gao to avoid deceit and seek peace with the Liangshan heroes. Gao ignores him and is eventually defeated. When Wen is captured by Liangshan, Song Jiang treats him with respect. Deeply moved, Wen helps the heroes establish contact with Su Yuanjing and works toward an imperial amnesty. He writes to Su, explaining the heroes’ loyalty and righteousness in detail and asking him to speak favorably of them before the emperor. Through their combined efforts, the court eventually agrees to grant an amnesty. Su Yuanjing personally carries the imperial edict to Liangshan to oversee the process. He tells Song Jiang and the others, “You worthy men do not know the full circumstances. I have come at the emperor’s command and have already been here for several days. You heroes have generously agreed to submit, fulfilling the greater duty. If I do not return promptly, I fear that jealous, treacherous ministers may raise fresh objections.”<sup>30</sup> Wen’s conduct embodies the ideals of speaking honestly in counsel and serving the country and its people. Although he works under Gao Qiu, he can distinguish right from wrong and, in the interests of the state and the people, helps the Liangshan heroes achieve their wish for an amnesty.

The loyalty and righteousness of these minor characters reveal the moral convictions of ordinary people across different social positions and circumstances. They challenge the assumption that righteousness in *Water Margin* belongs exclusively to its celebrated heroes. Loyalty rooted in gratitude, the most basic of these forms, reveals the sincere emotional ties that develop among people facing desperate circumstances. It shows that even the humblest life can give expression to moral duty within the limits of its possibilities. Loyalty grounded in justice brings out the moral strength of ordinary people, whether they live in the marketplace or work within the official system. Their refusal to abandon basic principles in the face of intimidation or self-interest preserves a measure of humanity in a dark age. Loyalty to the dynasty and country extends beyond private grievances and the interests of small groups, broadening the novel’s moral concerns from solidarity among companions to duty toward the state and its people. Together, the loyalty and righteousness of these figures greatly enrich the novel’s moral vision. *Water Margin* becomes more than a tale of heroic exploits: it offers an epic account of the ethical life of an entire society.

## 4. Conclusion

Loyalty and righteousness in *Water Margin* are not confined to the political ethics or outlaw brotherhood of its leading characters. In the actions of minor figures, they take the form of an everyday ethic rooted more closely in the lives of ordinary people. Their meanings accumulate over time: from the pre-Qin understanding of loyalty as conscientious devotion and righteousness as fitting and upright conduct, through the pairing of the two terms from the Han dynasty onward, to the conjunction of allegiance to the ruler and fidelity to friends in Yuan and Ming fiction. In the late Northern Song world depicted by *Water Margin*, official justice and the established moral order have broken down. The loyalty and righteousness of minor characters consequently appear most often in the repayment of kindness, the keeping of promises, the protection of the vulnerable, and fidelity to conscience.

Seen through the three dimensions of gratitude, justice, and survival, gratitude provides the emotional basis for mutual aid; justice safeguards the conditions of ordinary life; and duty to the dynasty and country extends these commitments to a wider community of survival. Old Jin and his daughter sheltering their benefactor, Li Xiao’er risking his safety to deliver a warning, and Bai Sheng preferring death to the betrayal of his brothers all exemplify loyalty rooted in gratitude. He Jiushu preserving a bone

fragment as evidence, Sun Ding defending the wrongly accused Lin Chong, and Yun Ge standing up against injustice exemplify loyalty grounded in justice. Jin Jie and Qin Yulan returning to the rightful dynasty, Song Wan and his companions dying for the country, and Wen Huanzhang and Su Yuanjing promoting an imperial amnesty exemplify a loyalty that moves from individual survival toward collective security and national stability. Though these acts may lack the spectacle of great heroic deeds, they provide the Liangshan world of loyalty and righteousness with its foundation in ordinary life. Compared with the novel's leading figures, minor characters express a loyalty that neither depends on the institutions of the court nor seeks official recognition. It grows from the emotional bonds and shared moral understandings that arise spontaneously among ordinary people. A systematic study of these characters through gratitude, justice, and survival can therefore redress the limitations of scholarship centered on the protagonists while revealing the diversity and complexity of loyalty and righteousness in traditional Chinese culture.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

## References

- Chen Lai. (2020). "The Concept of Righteousness in Classical Confucianism, with a Focus on Zhu Xi's Discussion of Righteousness." *Literature, History, and Philosophy*, no. 6.
- Collected Works of the Masters, vol. (1996). 5. Beijing: Tuanjie Publishing House, p. 682.
- Huang Hui. (1990). *Lunheng with Critical Annotations and Explanations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, pp. 809–810.
- Li Zhi. (2009). *A Book to Burn and Its Sequel*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, pp. 144–145.
- Qiao Zhenzhen. (2023). "Revisiting the Meaning of Loyalty and Righteousness in Ancient China." *Journal of Ludong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 40, no. 1.
- Qin Cuihong. (2010). "The Meaning and Evolution of Loyalty and Righteousness in Ancient China." *Confucius Studies*, no. 5.
- Shi Guangying. (2001). *New Prefaces with Critical Annotations and Explanations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, pp. 1048–1052.
- Shi Nai'an. (1991). *The Complete Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness with Commentary by Li Zhuowu*. Edited by He Shengsui, Song Xiaoyong, and Qian Zhenmin. Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House, p. 1.
- Shi Nai'an. (2001). *Water Margin*. Collated and annotated by Zhu Dekui. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House, p. 844.
- Shi Nai'an. (1997). "Editorial Principles for the Illustrated and Annotated Complete Water Margin of Loyalty and Righteousness." In *The Complete Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 416.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 44.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 129.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 130.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 218.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 321.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 330.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 330.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 330.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 107.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 107.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 1152.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 1142.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 1143.
- Shi Nai'an (Ming dynasty). (1997). *Water Margin*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p. 1028.
- Wang Ping. (2018). "Loyalty and Righteousness in the Hundred-Chapter Edition of Water Margin." In *Debates on Water Margin*, vol. 17. Chinese Water Margin Society, p. 11.
- Xu Weiyu. (2009). *Collected Commentaries on Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 249.
- Yang Bojun. (1981). *Annotations to the Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 1235.
- Yang Bojun. (1980). *The Analects with Translation and Annotations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 140.
- Yang Bojun. (1980). *The Analects with Translation and Annotations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 30.
- Yang Bojun. (1980). *The Analects with Translation and Annotations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p. 39.
- Contact: Email: inszlh@163.com | Tel: 18993930167