Shui-hu zhuan, written in a purely colloquial language, reveals the rebellious spirit and desperate actions of an otherwise, peaceful and law-abiding people during the early twelfth century of the Sung Dynasty. Some of the characters are historical, and the setting (Shantung) is geographically accurate.

Little is known about the putative author, Shih Nai-an, who had at his disposal, a mass of material, partly factual but mainly legendary, which storytellers, for some two hundred years had woven about the historical figures of Sung Chiang and his thirty-six majors and seventy-two minor chiefs. However, there is little doubt where the author’s sympathy lies. The bandit leaders are definitely the heroes of the novel, and their uprising can only be attributed to the government’s oppression and tyranny.

In this academy dissertation, I shall examine the character of a few major figures in Shui-hu zhuan. They are Sung Chiang (the Opportune Rain), Wu Yung (the Mastermind), Lu Chih-Shen (the Tattooed Monk), Lin Ch'ang (the Leopard Head), Wu Sung (the Itinerant), and Li K'uei (the Black Whirlwind). These heroes have different backgrounds, different personal traits and appearances, different experiences and contacts, however, they share a common fate in life, as the victims of official persecution, that forces them to tread together the path to Mount Liang.