

Timings:

03:38 Turbans

10:18 Sun Jian

19:47 Post Rebellion

32:28 He Jin vs eunuchs

44:45 Ending

[Music]

Steve "On and on the Great River rolls, racing east.

Of proud and gallant heroes its white-tops leave no trace,

As right and wrong, pride and fall turn all at once unreal

Yet ever the green hill stay

To blaze in the west-waning day

Fishers and woodsmen comb the river isles,

White crowned, they have seen enough of spring and autumn tide

To make good company over the wine jar

Where many a famed event, provides their merriment

The empire long divided, must unite

Long united, must divide

Thus it has ever been

Episode 2: Schemes At Luoyang. Welcome to the second episode of our new podcast Discord of the Three Kingdoms! I'm your host, I'm Steve and we're going to look at the next chapter of the novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This week we have two debut appearances: Zhou Gonjin is part of the team that helps prepare our episodes and he's

going to be a regular panellist on the show. Gongjin, why don't you tell us a little about yourself?

Gongjin: Gongjin here. I've been a fan of Three Kingdoms and Chinese history for a very long time and I'm very honoured to be part of the team. I do hope that the discussions in our episodes will introduce more people to this exciting period.

Steve: And alongside the two of us we're delighted to have a very special guest: Drew, welcome to Discourse of the Three Kingdoms!

Drew: Hi folks! I'm Drew, also known as Taishi Ci or just TC. I am a big Three Kingdoms fan, both the novel and the various media especially through Koei. I'm an amateur translator and I'm just here to participate in the discussions, talk about some of the themes of the novel so great to be here

Steve: Fantastic and if you have any questions about anything we discuss on this show, all three of us are on Tumblr and I believe Drew that you are on Twitter as well aren't you?

Drew: At the moment for as long as Twitter might stick around you can find me there and I'm on Tumblr as Fuyonggu.

Steve: Fantastic, so if you do have any questions feel free to get in touch with any of us

Now you may recall we left our last episode on a cliffhanger: an angry Zhang Fei was about to kill Dong Zhuo. Hopefully you've read chapter two since then but just in case: Gongjin, why don't you give us an overview of this week's chapter?

Gongjin: Absolutely. When the nation became chaotic, cities turned into ruins, mothers couldn't protect their sons, and wives lost their husbands. Thanks to Lord Huangfu we are able to live in peace.

In Chapter 2 we continue with the disastrous yellow turban conflict in chapter one. Fortunately, with the amazing work of generals like Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun, the yellow turbans were defeated. However, peace did not last long! Soon we see the uprising of yellow turban remnants at Wan and other small rebellions elsewhere, and this is where we were introduced to the young hero Sun Jian. Liu Bei and his two brothers we saw in chapter one also helped in defeating the yellow turbans and eventually they will be rewarded for their contributions alongside Sun Jian. But trouble also comes from within as the Han Dynasty struggled with intense court conflict between the officials and the eunuchs.

Steve: Excellent, thank you. So as Gongjin says this chapter continues with the yellow turban rebellion and that's going to be our first theme.

Yellow Turbans

Now one of the things that really sticks out in this chapter is the use of magic. Historically the yellow turbans were believed to perform miraculous healings but there is no suggestion in any of the historical sources that they used magic in battles. Drew, why do you think the author included this kind of magic in his accounts?

Drew: I think the inclusion of magic here is primarily, it's kind of a literary entertainment to give the reader some compelling reason to read about the struggles against the yellow turbans. Because we'll see for much of the novel, the fighting between the various sides usually you're meant to sympathise with one side or the other but you can understand the motivations, the reasons behind why the other side is fighting. You can see where they can be coming from but with the case of the yellow turbans you're not really expected to see, they're mostly just portrayed as the bad guys, there's not a lot of characterization behind the leaders of the rebellion. The brothers really only get a few lines if that and the remnants are just names on the page. So to give you a compelling reason to follow along they lynch just magical elements for them which we'll see in a couple of one-sided battles later on in the novel which we'll get to someday. But for now that's why you have such fantastical things as the black aura and clouds with spirit soldiers descending from the sky and why they have the good guys resort to foul objects to dispel the spells, that sort of thing.

Steve: And the magic makes the scenes memorable in a way they wouldn't be otherwise. I think we see this in another form of three kingdoms media as well don't we? It's noticeable in the Koei games that the magic plays a really prominent part in the yellow turban battles because otherwise the battles would be a bit boring wouldn't they?

Gongjin: Yea definitely. Having magic adds some mythical and fantastical elements to the gameplay. I actually find it more enjoyable and refreshing to have them in the Yellow Turban battles.

Steve: Yeah so the yellow Turbans battles in Koei are often quite empty and quite easy because Zhang Jue is the only one who's a character on there isn't he. Otherwise it would be a dull battle, it just be beating the generic officers the whole way through and the magic makes it for a more interesting conflict.

Drew: I think there is something to say about how the use of magic by one side kind of contributes to the sort of illegitimacy of their cause. Where we see the heroes are smart enough to figure out how to counter the magic but they don't resort to using their own magic themselves. They just cancel out the enemies and then it gets down to just a good old one-on-one battle where the more virtuous side can win over.

Steve: Yeah so it's really interesting that yellow turbans are very determinedly presented as the villains in this aren't they? Which is particularly fascinating when going back to chapter one for a brief moment. Zhang Jue is presented as someone who starts off by wanting to do miraculous healings and looking after people. So it's really interesting how the novel takes what's initially presented as quite a positive presentation and swings to being very negative, very quickly and I think you're right. Magic is a really helpful device to make sure that they are perceived, how the author wants them to be.

Drew: There is a certain idea that power doesn't necessarily corrupt but it reveals who a person really is and I think this is one of the first instances we'll see that, in the novel, to where someone who initially seems good, who is even warned by the old man who gives him the text that if your thinking goes wrong, your things are not going to turn out well for you and it does not end well for him.

Steve: And so the yellow turbans are defeated throughout this chapter. They lose various conflicts which again tells us that they weren't quite the military force, they weren't the big threat that perhaps the novel wants to work them out into. And then we get to the yellow turban's last stand in the novel. The battle at Wan. Does anyone want to talk to us about that battle?

Gongjin: In the novel, after being defeated, some of the Yellow Turban remnants occupied Wan and the Han court deployed Zhu Jun to suppress them. The siege took quite some time, and later on, after a man named Sun Jian led his forces to aid Zhu Jun, the turbans were finally defeated. It's interesting that throughout the siege, the Turbans, with a few ten thousand men strong, seemed to have the numbers advantage, but were not described to gain the upper hand with that. Perhaps an indication of them being disorganised and untrained, compared to the forces on the Han side.

What do you think Drew?

Drew: The battle does give a good opportunity to demonstrate the different thinking that Liu Bei has compared to some of the old guard commanders because the remnant rebels are kind of like a reactive force. The heroes have to decide how to handle them and they're just going to react based on what they do. And so we have Liu Bei initially suggesting that they'll be spared which he is argued down from that position, he still gives the idea that they should leave a corner open, leave a line of retreat so they can more easily deal with them. And at the same time we have other commanders coming in who are demonstrating their bravery by going in to attack them from in the city.

Steve: And what's really interesting about this battle, one of the things that's really interesting about this battle, is that Liu Bei isn't there. Again he is being used by the author as a plot device to explore this campaign and is given more prominence as a result. And instead we meet a very important character don't we in this in this chapter, in this scene. Sun Jian who is the first one over the wall in the final victory when they do finally destroy this force.

So that's the end of the yellow turbans with Sun Jian going over the wall and that's going to be our next theme. But just before we move on, I just want to flag to you that our next episode after this one is going to be a deep dive so it's going to be a longer episode, potentially a couple of hours long, where we're going to really consider in depth the yellow turbans. So we'll think about such things as what it is that they believed and the organisation and we'll really dig into some depth about the military campaigns so if you feel you've not got a fair treatment of that topic so far: don't panic we will be covering that next time.

Sun Jian

But yes, so we meet Sun Jian who is a commander at the end of this campaign against the yellow turbans and he's going to be a really prominent figure. So we're going to spend a little bit of time now exploring him. The novel, when it first introduces him tells us a little bit about his history, about his life before this point which is normally a sign that he's a prominent character. And Drew, what do we know about Sun Jian's history up until this point?

Drew: Well his background is a bit murky both historically and in the novel. We read the claim that he was supposedly descended from the ancient military strategist Sun Tzu. And so his direct lineage: when his father was allegedly some kind of merchant, I think in the later sources they say he's a melon farmer or melon salesman, something of that degree. As for himself we read as a young man he was with his father, they come upon some pirates who are out dividing up booty that they've just taken and he decides to charge alone into the fray to scare all the pirates away and even manages to kill one of them himself. And the Pirates all flee, he's able to recover the stolen goods, bring them back to their owners.

So we can see even as a young man, he's very willful. When he sees an advantage he can take he'll charge in and try to get it right away, even against the advice of his father who tells him there's nothing to do with you, you're just risking your neck to go in there but he sees what he wants. In this case it works out for him and he can get in there and take it and then we see the same kind of behaviour when he actually arrives on the scene at Wan, since we read that he's one of the first over the walls to get into the city. There's a lot of bravery, a lot of ambition behind this character, even from the beginning.

Steve: So Drew picked up on the idea that Sun Jian's father might have been a melon farmer. There's an anecdote about that: Gongjin, do you want to read us that anecdote and share some thoughts about it?

Gongjin: Certainly. This anecdote is about Sun Jian's father, named Sun Zhong. When Sun Zhong was young his family was very poor, only making a living by growing and selling melons. He lived with his mother and was described as utmost sincere and filial. So one day when the melons were ripe, Sun Zhong saw three young men with elaborate clothes approach him. These men asked for some melons to eat. Sun Zhong being very kind and sincere, invited them to his hut where he gave them plenty of melons and shared his meal with them. When the visitors were about to leave, they told Zhong that they had received great favour from him, and wished to repay him by showing him a great place to bury his family. They then asked Zhong if he would want a place that secures countless generations of marquises, or a place that ensures a few generations of emperors. Sun Zhong chose the place with emperors, and so the visitors showed the location to him. They then said to Zhong that they were actually gods of fate, that now Zhong must return home, and that he shall not turn back to look at them for a hundred steps. Sun Zhong was of course very curious about all this, so he turned after only 60 steps, and to his amazement saw the visitors turned into cranes and flew away! They were indeed gods. And hence afterwards Sun Zhong buried his mother where he was shown.

It's quite a fascinating tale about the rise of the Sun family.

Steve: Interesting, so he has the choice of whether he wants his descendants to be Emperors or not. Now you're gonna have to keep listening to the podcast to know whether that decision has any fruits in it. But what do you think about that decision: do you think that is a wise decision, do you think the people that recalled that wants us to think that he's made a wise decision?

Gongjin: I think the story was not much about whether it was a good decision to be emperors or not. It was more of an interesting tale that gives us more background about the Sun family.

Steve: And Gongjin, what would be the significance of people saying that Sun Jian's father was a merchant?

Gongjin: I think that is quite interesting. I think when you look at the story of his father as a merchant and also even the melon farmer story, it does portray the general idea that the Sun family was not well to do, they are not big names of the era in contrast to Cao Cao and Liu Bei's status and connections.

Steve: Yeah so merchants weren't seen particularly positively by Confucianism which is the major thought of the day. So it's something of a smear campaign, isn't it, to link him to the merchants whereas linking him to the famous General Sun Tzu is kind of the opposite. It's a positive connection to be made which is really interesting. You've already touched on this Gongjin but it's interesting to look at how he's contrasted with Liu Bei in the way that both of them are presented. Shall we start with some similarities Drew? What were the similarities between how Sun Jian and Liu Bei are presented in the novel?

Drew: Well they both have a supposedly distinguished lineage. We've read earlier how Liu Bei is a several generations removed descendant of one of the princes of the Han Dynasty and so they kind of have a legacy that they're wanting to build back up to. We both see they're capable of working hard, they're both good soldiers as we see in how they're handling the rebellion and so there we kind of want to root for both of them to rise up from their lower background proving themselves here and later to see what they can accomplish.

Steve: Okay so what's the difference between how Liu Bei and Sun Jian is presented?

Drew: Well I think in negative aspects for the novel, which surrounding society at that time would pick up on, is that they're both trying to improve themselves but you kind of see Sun Jian and his family, more strivers a kind of new money if you will, they want it too much. There is you've got his father working as a merchant which is a disrespected profession, that's not seen as good honest work but just kind of moving money around and making money off the labour of others. And then you've got Sun Jian, he's very active in his campaigns. Liu Bei had to be persuaded into signing up to help with the rebellion, you get the scene from the first chapter with him sighing in front of the government notice, instead of rushing down to the government office like we might imagine Sun Jian might have done.

And so Liu Bei, also his background is kind of artisan work, weaving mats and making straw sandals, and then going off to be a good student. You can kind of see he just wants to do the

right things, he's not necessarily trying to get good stuff for himself but just trying to be a good person and good things will come to him naturally that way.

Steve: Yeah so it's really interesting making sandals is a poor profession isn't it but in Confucian morality at least you're making something and contributing towards society whereas as you say merchants are seen as just moving money around which is not a positive contribution. So even in that you can see the difference between how they are being presented and as we touched on earlier, the novel even does this in the fact that Liu Bei is elevated to real prominence in this section of the novel and whereas Sun Jian was really involved in the military campaign. He came from the same area of the country as Zhu Jun, the commander that is leading this battle, and he was involved in all of Zhu Jun campaigns during the yellow turban period. Whereas he, in the novel, just appears right at the end to have some final involvement and so he was really demoted from prominence.

Drew: I think that's the big reason why it's important to have the both of them included in these chapters. It's not necessarily true that they were there at these events but it is real to their characters, you read about how they handle these situations and you can believe if they had been there, this is how they would have reacted.

Steve: And the history records do say that Sun Jian was the first person over the wall at Wan, don't they, and give him that record of being a real prominent fighting man. Which I do think is really interesting as we go forward and we'll see that Sun Jian is a frontline commander, he earned his rank the hard way. As you referred to earlier, he fought against pirates, that's how he first became prominent and single-handedly arresting some pirates and he was involved in a couple of other rebellion suppressions before the yellow turbans even came along. Gradually getting promoted, up and up the military rank but I think he never forgets where he comes from. He's always a frontline military officer who perhaps gets promoted above where he thinks he is whereas the others as they go on become more we don't get much suggestion later on that Cao Cao or Liu Bei are fighting on the front lines, they tend to be commanders commanding from the rear don't they. Which is really interesting but we will pick up on that at a later date because I think it is important when we think about a later event in Sun Jian's life.

Post Rebellion

So that brings us quite neatly onto our third theme so after the yellow turbans are defeated, we have the post-rebellion period. Which is like a calm between a couple of storms. Now in the novel Sun Jian gets an appointment because he's got friends at court whereas Liu Bei doesn't. So again we get this continued contrast between the two. The novel presents the fact that it's to do with who your friends are that gets you rank and perhaps to do with bribes. What was the system for gaining rank in the Han Dynasty?

Drew: At this point they're not really imperial exams per se as we might be familiar with later periods. A big element both with getting your initial appointments to office and advancing through the ranks for much of the dynasty had been recommendations. If you know a person they can recommend you to the court, to get a position of the capitol or somewhere in the provinces, they'll attest to your skills and your character, you might be personally evaluated

by someone else with the government and from there you're just you have to demonstrate how well you work in office or how well you function around the capitol to receive your post.

And so I imagine going into how the initial appointments are received by Liu Bei and Sun Jian here and the differences and how well they're able to maintain them and then at this time of course there is bribery. There is even some direct purchasing of offices mostly for the upper tiers, the highest levels of the government but I imagine either historically, or we can imagine historically at this time, that there would have been some direct payments or bribes to get or keep the lower offices, that are good, they're being handed out here.

Steve: And I think it's worth making a distinction between purchase of offices and bribes because purchasing an office was seen as a perfectly valid form of advancement. Some of you may be aware of the Napoleonic War system, in the 18th century-19th century, where purchasing of military ranks was a normal system and that came with the advantage that it put money in the coffers of governments who were trying to fight wars. And say we know that the Han Dynasty were struggling for money and so selling ranks was really helpful to them because that put money into the government's bank account so perhaps the key difference between purchasing ranks and bribery is where the money goes. Gongjin, what do you think, what's the difference between where the money goes?

Gongjin: When there is bribery involved, the officers pocket the money whereas when we pay for a particular rank the money generally goes to the state. In the case of going to the state the money can ideally be used to support various activities especially when the national reserves are running low.

Steve: Thank you but I think that raises an interesting question, why did the Han government need so much money? What was it all being spent on?

Gongjin: Well firstly the Empire at this point is in decline. There are constant power struggles and rampant corruption, together with recurring natural disasters like floods and numerous rebellions, the court definitely needs more money to handle everything and just run the Empire generally. Selling ranks is certainly a very plausible way of getting more funding for the state and this is not something that is new as well. The Qin dynasty previously did something similar when they experienced locust swarms.

On another level it's also about the emperor's background: Emperor Ling was poor when he was young and he always felt that the previous Emperor did not have enough personal funds to support various personal hobbies. So taking at least part of this rank money for his own hobby was also one of the motives behind why Emperor Ling wanted to sell official ranks.

Steve: And so we see an example of the bribes in the novel so the two important generals against the yellow turbans refused to pay bribes, were sacked and then Liu Bei is asked to pay a bribe by someone who comes to call at his new office. In the novel Gongjin what is Zhang Fei's response to this attempt to enlist it a bribe from Liu Bei:

Gongjin: Zhang Fei was very furious. Without informing Liu Bei, he dragged the magistrate out by his hair, then tied him up and whipped him numerous times. In an earlier version of the novel, the Pinghua, Zhang Fei actually ended up killing the magistrate afterwards.

Steve: Drew in history is it Zhang Fei that attacks the inspector who's asking for the bribe?

Drew: Unfortunately it is not. We read in the historical accounts that it was Liu Bei who, when the inspector came by, Liu Bei was not unreasonably worried that he was going to be removed from his position on account of the people who had received their posts based on military merits were going to be laid off. And so to forestall that and to, based on the perception that he was being snubbed by the inspector who didn't seem properly responsive to his courtesies, Liu Bei decided he needed a good thrashing

Steve: So Liu Bei does the thrashing? But that doesn't fit the Liu Bei we see in the novel?

Drew: Well on one element it's a little too active, we see in a lot of other instances in the novel that he is just a virtuous person who is presented with circumstances and has to decide how to properly react to them. And this is kind of a contrast to where he's a little prouder, a little more prickly than we might expect of his novel characterization. And it also builds on the fact that Zhang Fei in the novel is the one who whips him is true to the earlier episode we had read where he was about to kill Dong Zhuo for not showing the brothers proper respect.

Steve: So Zhang Fei's temper is going to be a recurring theme.

I do think it's worth dwelling on this contrast between the Liu Bei of the novel and the Liu Bei of history. So for example Liu Bei gets this rank because he starts crying doesn't he, that he's been ignored whilst other people who have got the right friends get promoted. It is a crying Liu Bei, in keeping with the Liu Bei that we see in history

[interruption]

Gongjin: Liu Bei was rarely expressive

Drew: That's yes that's the same I was going to mention that we historically its mentioned he rarely shows his emotions.

Steve: So Liu Bei rarely shows his emotions in history according to the records. Why do you think the novel presents him so differently to how history describes him?

Drew: To one degree I'd say there is incorporating an element of opera traditions. A lot of times in theatre you have to be very emotive to make sure that the audience is picking up on the emotions that the characters are selling and I think that blends into how he and other characters tend to react to events in the novel. On another level I think it's kind of he's feeling emotionally overwhelmed by how people are not acting properly as they should. It's less that he feels he deserves it and more this as it's how it should be done. That people should be recognized, should be appreciated for the good work, the good virtues that they've had.

Steve: Thank you and Liu Bei is a fighter like he becomes prominent in history through the fact that he does well in yellow turban and perhaps future events and so he is a military man

first and foremost. And military men often are people that don't show emotion whereas the novel perhaps is presenting him in a slightly different light. Do you think that's true Gongjin?

Gongjin: Yeah I think that's fair. I think it's more trying to paint Liu Bei as someone who is really benevolent, someone really kind, someone who is good-hearted and being a warlord kind of goes second in line there. And to an extent, I believe it comes down to having consistent and varied personalities to make the story more engaging, and more memorable.

Steve: Yeah and so the novel uses other characters as a foil for Liu Bei like Zhang Fei.

Gongjin: Yeah

Steve: Who does the violence on his behalf so it can keep Liu Bei as this virtuous pure figure

Drew: To a degree it can outsource his expressions to his brothers because his proud side, his colder demeanour, you put that all in Guan Yu because that seems to fit him pretty well and then his more passionate, angry or happier side to Zhang Fei. So they're kind of the outlets, kind of good cop bad cop if you will, where they can react and then he can come in to restrain them. Rather than having him restrain his own emotions.

Steve: And we don't see it just yet but later on Liu Bei is kind of presented as somewhat military incompetent. He isn't all that great at commanding battles and so another character is given his strategic brilliance to make up for that which will be a theme that we'll pick up later on. So Liu Bei, well Zhang Fei in the novel, beats the inspector, Liu Bei has to flee and they kind of disappear off the scene for a little bit and the novel takes us back to the court.

Where there are still crises going on because the yellow turbans were a symptom rather than the cause. They rebelled because things were not going very well in the country and so there are some other rebellions that take place.

So let's touch on them really briefly, so what other rebellions did the novel mention?

Gongjin: There was one led by Zhang Chun in You province up north. This was briefly touched on in the novel, where Liu Bei was sent by a fellow clansman of the Liu imperial family to suppress Zhang Chun. Historically, the Zhang Chun rebellion lasted about 2 years, with Zhang Chun teaming up with Wuhuan tribes to revolt in the You province. Initially, they had great success in numerous commanderies in You province and defeating local Han forces. The Han court then got a well-respected imperial clansman, Liu Yu to become the governor of You and suppressed Zhang Chun. And that was also when Liu Bei was involved, not directly through his royal clansman, but under his class-mate Gongsun Zan who will make an appearance in later episodes.

Steve: It's really interesting the novel doesn't actually major on that one doesn't it? Considering that for Liu Bei actually does come to greater prominence and there is another rebellion that takes place as well which would give another one of our main characters the chance to shine.

Drew: I believe this is the one, Xu Chang is a rebel down in Changsha commandery in the south of the empire. Where Sun Jian is sent to go put him down and take care of him and receives some more rewards for his performance down there

Steve: Yeah, absolutely. So it's really interesting that the novel chooses to focus on the yellow turban campaign when actually there are other rebellions that are potentially just as dangerous to the Han Dynasty. And I think the reason the yellow turbans is the ones highlighted is it allows the novelist to focus on Liu Bei, Cao Cao and Sun Jian. All at once, who as we continue on, we will see are three very important characters and that will be the key. Whereas the other rebellions, which are just as important historically, fade into the background because it only allows one or two of those characters to shine.

But what's important for us, as we look at the history, is that the government don't take the hint from the yellow turbans. They don't think "oh stuff's gone really badly, maybe we should try and help the people and make people not want to rebel", instead the status quo is continued and so further rebellions continue to take place and that leads to a major breakdown. Or will at some point will lead, you would have to, think to a major breakdown and perhaps that leads us really neatly into our fourth theme which is He Jin versus the eunuchs.

He Jin vs The Eunuchs

How is He Jin presented in the novel?

Drew: Well he's, it's kind of like with Sun Jian but to an even worse degree. He has even less of a respectable background, to my knowledge we are not shown that he has any prominent ancestors at all. He's just mentioned this from a butcher's family, I believe he himself was firmly a butcher, that he's only in his current lofty position now because his sister happened to give birth to the emperor's son, become the empress and so like many empresses through history, she brings in all her relatives to kind of back her up in positions of power. And so now her brother He Jin is one of the chief military officers.

Steve: Okay so he is a butcher and he gets there purely because of his sister. Now is that the He Jin that we see in history?

Gongjin: I think He Jin in history was actually quite different from the novel. Historically, He Jin, though others had forewarned, was the first to discover the actual yellow turban plot and notify the emperor of it. There are also many records of He Jin recruiting notable and well-known scholars as officials. So at least there is some degree of competency in He Jin.

Steve: Yeah, thank you, I think that's really helpful to be reminded of. So there is some truth in what the novel says. I did some research this morning, I was trying to find out where the claims that He Jin's family were butchers came from and Rafe de Crespigny's big biography of lots of different figures does repeat that claim. That there were rumours that their father, so He Jin and Empresses He's father was a butcher, certainly the fact that they didn't come from a prominent family was remarked on and He Jin did get his first recommendation to the

Central Court off the back of the fact that his sister was liked by the emperor and provided him with a son. But as you say Gongjin really helpfully he is the one that discovers the yellow turban plot and his promotion to this really prominent office comes off the back of competency. Why do we think that the novel doesn't want to present He Jin in that light?

Drew: I think it's an element of all of the old guard figures in the government being portrayed as either as being actively evil or if not evil then ineffective and incompetent. Either they're causing the dynasty to fall or they're unable to prevent it from falling and as he's one of the most prominent figures in the government, if he's not doing the bad deeds himself, he must be one of the main ones responsible for failing to prevent it.

Gongjin: It's also particularly important in the Han context because there were so many prominent kin consorts, the He family was not the first. And from this long line of kin consorts in the Han, most of them were not well-liked and well-regarded.

Steve: Interesting. Yeah so they can't show him to be competent because then it will question whether the whole government is incompetent or not. I wonder if there's also another reason why the novel fairly frequently refers to the fact that the eunuchs were an important support for Empress He, doesn't it?

Drew: That is true, they at this point are supporting her clan. We see them shift around a little bit, just based on whoever they can support that will keep them in power.

Steve: Yeah so the eunuchs are only interested in keeping power for themselves in the novel and why might Empress He be a good person for them to choose to support in that regard?

Drew: Well currently her son is who, if Emperor Ling is favouring to be his successor and so as long as they can keep her support, they'll have the support of the next Emperor once he goes as well.

Steve: Absolutely and she doesn't really have anyone other than her immediate family that she can look to for support. The He family are new blood, they don't have that long line of ancestral alliances and the court officials and the nobility are often quite hostile to new blood and commoners that they see coming in and stealing their territory. And so the He clan might be natural allies to the eunuchs because they are both outsiders to the rest of the court. Do you think that's true?

Drew: I would say so. It seems in most of Chinese history if eunuchs are mentioned it's because they're doing something wrong. It's very rare that you hear of a good eunuch; they're either evil or just entirely in the background. So there's a sense with them that for them to have any sort of power is just illegitimate on its face and it's very similar with maternal relatives of the emperor, anyone who's related to the empress, that they should not be granted too much power. To the extent that any of them hold high positions in government there's always a concern that they're going to dominate the government in the empress's favour. That they'll try to ensure that their relations to the throne gives them more power even than the royal family, the male relatives of the emperor should have. Since they're both

viewed with such disdain by the general Confucian establishment, it makes sense for them to team up where they can.

Gongjin: I would say there is some kind of vicious cycle here. Because of the disdain from the Confucian establishment, maternal relatives and eunuchs only have each other to collaborate with, which results in more disdain from the Confucian establishment because now their collaborations make them even more of a threat.

Steve: Interesting. So we're identifying that there are three different factions fairly prominently throughout Chinese history. You have got the maternal relatives of the emperor, you have got the eunuchs and you've got the established Court officials and all three of them are vying for prominence.

Now it's often been the case that the emperor, if they have been born, if they've come into power young, have been dominated by the empress dowager so their maternal family and so if they've wanted to rule in their own right, the only faction they could really turn to were the eunuchs to offer them support. And court officials are the ones that write the history and so they get to present the others how they choose perhaps and so the other two factions are presented more negatively.

Now what's really interesting here is if we've got those three factions, we would expect He Jin to be in the faction that is relying on maternal relatives to the emperor and perhaps would be most likely to be supporting and be supported by the eunuchs. Is that where we see He Jin in this?

Gongjin: Nope. In the novel we see He Jin actually plotting with a lot of other people to attempt to get rid of the eunuchs. This was the case in history as well.

Steve: Yeah so He Jin actually ends up on the opposite side to where we would expect him to be. Why do we think that happened?

Drew: Well from what we read in the novel with what's going on with the government, we see the eunuchs portrayed, especially the ten regular attendants, as one of the biggest sources of problems of the government. And so the kind of the aristocratic the Confucian elite group are really leaning on him since he's got the power to deal with it. They want his help to get rid of the eunuchs to make the government function better, which also would help increase their own power, but I'm sure they're mainly portraying it as trying to bring back good government. And so for him it's mostly an issue of he'd rather this just not be a problem, that either he doesn't have to do anything or he just has to do enough to please both sides. He's not necessarily personally against the eunuchs but it's an issue he has to grapple with because of the elites are leaning on him.

Steve: So in the novel he's presented very weakly, isn't he. He essentially agrees with whoever the last person he speaks with and does whatever they say and so the key is to isolate him and to make sure that only your voice is the one that's being heard. I do think He Jin is a fascinating historical figure because he's more competent than he's generally presented but I do think this idea that he ends up in a faction that you wouldn't expect him in

makes him a really interesting person and perhaps he's someone else that we will think about later in a deeper dive and really analyse that more in depth.

So the faction of the court that have He Jin's ear here often and there's one really prominent person in that faction: Yuan Shao. I think it's worth discussing him for a little bit so historically what do we know about Yuan Shao and the Yuan clan?

Drew: He comes from a very prominent family. I believe they mentioned that in the past four generations of his family, three family members have held the highest offices in government. They have a lot of clients and retainers across the central provinces of the Empire, many prominent people, relatives in high office and Yuan Shao himself has a bit of a reputation. Historically he has gained a lot of virtue through his filial conduct up to this point, he's had some military achievements as well and so we can understand why he'd be such a loud voice in He Jin's council here.

Gongjin: Yuan Shao himself also had good relations with the Confucian scholars, some of them very against the eunuchs or had past conflicts with them, such as Zhang Miao and He Yong. Especially He Yong, Yuan Shao and him often secretly met and helped those in trouble because of the eunuchs, giving them support and aiding them in their escapes. With all these connections and activities, it is also not surprising that the eunuchs were not fond of Yuan Shao as well. So there is actually a good amount of anti-eunuch track records, which from another angle explains why he had such a loud voice here.

Steve: Excellent. So he comes from an incredibly prominent family and so he is one of the loudest voices speaking into He Jin's ear. He (Yuan Shao) is very decisive in this part of the novel, Gongjin is that something that we normally associate with this character?

Gongjin: Yuan Shao was best known for something that will happen much later and for that particular event much later, it seems that he was quite indecisive so it's quite different from then and now.

Steve: Yeah so a character who's known for being indecisive is really decisive here. Drew, what do you think is the big difference between later on and here and why might he be more decisive now?

Drew: I think the big difference in circumstance is here he's just part of the council. He's someone giving advice, he's not the person who has to hear the advice and make the decision. So it's a lot easier to propose big plans when you know someone else has to decide whether to go with them or not and in this case, at least from his perspective the question seems very clear. That the eunuchs are causing trouble, they should all be gotten rid of, there's not really that he doesn't have any interest in having the eunuch stick around. There's no benefit to that for him like there would be for He Jin, so that's not. he doesn't have to deal with keeping his sister happy and making sure his family stays in power. It's just eunuchs are bad they need to go. And the only question is whether his boss has the resolve to do it or not.

Steve: Thank you, yes that's helpful and perhaps a cautionary tale for all of us: it is easier to be advising someone when you don't actually have to make the final decision. Might be something for each of us to take away and reflect on.

Ending

So this chapter of the novel ends with He Jin being encouraged to act and we have a speaker right at the end of the chapter advising a course of action and that speaker is Cao Cao, who we meet again. An incredibly, as we've said before, an important character going forward. Now we don't get to hear what Cao Cao's advice is, that's the cliffhanger that this chapter ends on, what action is he going to advise? And there's a poem that talks about that isn't there. Gongjin, would you read that poem for us?

Gongjin: Wise counsel can undo the harm of vicious ministers—
When and if it is heeded

Steve: When and if it is heeded and that's the question that's we're going to be left with. Is Cao Cao's advice going to be wise? Is it going to undo the harm of vicious ministers? and is it going to be heeded? Is He Jin going to be wise enough to listen to the advice?

Well you will have to come back in a few weeks time to find out the answers to those questions but for the time being it's goodbye from me.

Drew: Thanks for having me around folks, I hope we had a great discussion.

Gongjin: Thanks for having me around too.

Steve: Brilliant thank you guys. It's been wonderful to have you with us and we look forward to seeing you all soon.

Everyone: Goodbye

[Music]