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Introduction: 00:00

He Jin vs Eunuchs: 02:33

Dong Zhuo: 27:15

Han Princes: 37:36

Ding Yuan vs Lu Bu: 44:39

End phase: 59:30

Steve: Episode Three: Fire and Blood

Hello and welcome to our latest episode of discourse of the Three Kingdoms. This week Jude and I are being joined by someone who's been part of the online three kingdom community for even longer than us! Cat why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself

Cat: Well my name's Cat and I've been part of the online discourse for uh 21 years which is odd since I'm 25 years old as we all know! I have a master's degree from Ching Hua University in Beijing, I lived in Shanghai for a few years and my cat is named after someone who you haven't met in the novel yet and who historically amazing, in the novel an idiot and I look forward to talking about people who are idiots in the novel.

Jude: Plenty of people here in this chapter

Steve: Yes we'll have to have you back when he appears in an episode

Cat: Oh you will I'm gonna be so mad it's gonna be great

Steve: Excellent, we look forward to that. So since our last episode looking at chapter two you've been able to experience two bonus episodes but that means that chapter two was quite a long time ago. So just in case you've forgotten what happened: that episode ended with He Jin plotting to remove the eunuchs and Cao Cao offering some advice. Jude can you give us an overview of chapter three before we begin?

Jude: When we left the novel last, the turbans had been defeated by the Han Imperial forces and the volunteers. But peace would not set on the land as corruption continued, Emperor Ling's death sparked division at court with the He family seizing control against their court opponents. He Jin, backed by Yuan Shao and Cao Cao plots to remove the eunuchs but is hesitant.

In this chapter He Jin summons the armies including the disloyal Dong Zhuo against warnings of his council. The eunuchs decide to kill He Jin who ignores the concerns of his advisers and walks into a trap. He Jin's officers respond with violence to his death, burning the palace gates, slaughtering every eunuch and sending the Imperial family into flight. The Imperial Prince's return but Dong Zhuo had arrived with troops and is not impressed by the emperor. Building his strength Dong Zhuo seeks to depose the emperor but when Ding Yuan opposes he turns to Ding Yuan's mighty adopted son Lu Bu to get rid of the problem in exchange for a great horse.

He Jin vs the Eunuchs

Steve: Excellent so that's quite a lot for us to discuss! So let's start by thinking about He Jin versus the eunuchs which was our first theme! So chapter two ended we've just said with Cao Cao giving He Jin some advice. How important was Cao Cao's advice in history?

Jude: Not at all.

Cat: What advice?

Jude: Well the comment about the eunuchs may have been apocryphal and that we don't know who it was too. Cao Cao was not part of He Jin's circle, he was a friend of Yuan Shao but at this point he was just a lowly colonel

Cat: I doubt that he even would have been there

Jude: Yeah he was vaguely around the capital. When we talked in the first two chapters Liu Bei was running around doing fighting all these battles he was not a part of, it's now Cao Cao's turn

Steve: So we're saying that in the past Liu Bei got credit for things that he didn't deserve and now it's the turn of Cao Cao

Jude: Yeah

Steve: I guess we'll have to stop giving the obey quite so much abuse for that. [laughter]

Cat: I'll stay out of this one

Steve: All right so for those of you who don't know who Cat is, you'd consider yourself a Cao Cao fan wouldn't you?

Cat: Yeah I would. I'm one of those obnoxious American Cao Cao fans.

Steve: Some of our fans won't yet know why being a Cao Cao fan is somewhat controversial. Maybe we'll get you back on to try and defend him when he does the indefensible in a few chapters time

Cat: Absolutely, though it's almost cool now to like him so

Jude: Yeah he's a very popular character

Cat: I want to pop in about something here: I don't think it's something that can be discussed enough but I want to talk about why the eunuchs here are considered so bad. You know I think what you see is normally you're going to see this sense of you know the eunuchs they

were decadent and frivolous and they built themselves mansions and did all of these, you know, shallow things and you know they're friends with the Empress and to me

Steve: It's awful isn't it being friends with the Empress

Cat: Yeah. So it's not a coincidence, at least I don't think it's a coincidence that these depraved eunuchs are also the ones who are men who were castrated. When you see the way the role of how eunuchs are given these roles in the downfall of whichever Dynasty, because China's dynasties collapsed more than once, but there is definitely it's an old adage in Chinese historical texts. Chinese historical texts tend to have a lot of morals in them, you know, instead of just facts so there's always a lesson you'll find in even the historical texts much less obviously than novels. But you'll see this theme of how when women have control over government it's everyone's downfall because they're you know decadent and shallow and trying to get their family in power and the same thing with the eunuchs. Just just gonna throw that out there that that's an important theme of how gender affects someone's ability to rule or their honour in Chinese Tales.

Steve: Okay so what you're saying is it is very clear in this chapter that the eunuchs are presented as the villains. That they are people who should not be involved in politics, the novel was written with a very clear bias saying that everything goes wrong because, did you use the phrase unnatural beings, there's certainly a phrase that is used about eunuchs that these are unnatural beings who've got no place in politics, are getting involved and therefore things go wrong and you're saying that that's not true that's not fair that is the way they're being presented because it fits in with the historical narrative that doesn't like eunuchs.

Cat: Yeah, I will say we can't know exactly what these eunuchs were doing and what they were like because history has recorded them as mainly being, you know, in line with not being great and I'm sure that they weren't great but they probably weren't bad because they were eunuchs, because they have this role with the empress, it's almost like too suspiciously consistent throughout these tales that it's somehow the eunuchs or the empress who are always messing things up or concubines.

Steve: I find it difficult to believe they were any worse than than any other faction. So in earlier we discussed ,when we were talking about the yellow turbans, how Feng Xu and Xu Feng, confusingly similar names, were both part of the yellow turban rebellion and they were eunuchs and so clearly there were people within the eunuchs who were trying to undermine the emperor. But you could absolutely say that about, I mean, did He Jin really want to build up the Emperor? If the emperor had become authoritative he would have lost his power so I I'm curious about whether it was in his basic interests

Jude: He Jin's own family was actually concerned about his loyalties and what his intentions were actually going to be. Cat's right, the novels even worse than historical texts on this, like the historical texts will acknowledge there were, just occasionally, a good eunuch to be found. Or that woman could be helpful in the and I air quote this "right roles" but the novel really writes woman out and

Steve: I can think of only one woman who we've not met yet who has presented positively whilst giving advice and even that's nuanced isn't it?

Jude: The novel hates eunuchs, I mean it really really hates eunuchs.

Cat: One of the reasons why you see people vying for the position of Empress Dowager, that would be Empress He and Empress Dong, is because when you have these young children, it was said that it was really the empress Dowager the mother or the grand Empress Dowager the grandmother who was in charge of politics at the time.

Jude: Yeah, the later Han had a problem of emperors dying young, leaving either their own young children like Emperor Ling had just done, or in quite a few cases no children. The Dowager would unsurprisingly pick a child who is old enough to survive but young to reign for a long time

Steve: Can I throw it out there then but perhaps the one of the reasons why women in being involved in politics had such a bad reputation was that because as you don't get an empress that's in charge it's always an Empress Dowager which means that they're in a situation where they're holding power in lieu of somebody else which means that there is a power struggle going on. The Dowager is fighting against often not the eunuchs but maybe they're her own family, certainly against court officials which means that it's always going to be a time of instability. The good times in the Han Dynasty was when there was a strong Emperor and I'm not saying it couldn't have been a strong Empress if the system had allowed for that but it was clear where the centre of power lay.

Cat: Absolutely, I mean the fact that we see this is because they, like you just said a second ago, because it was not allowed for a female to be in power. You're kind of, one you know I'm not gonna say there might have been daughters who could have been in power but you know, that would be a fantasy on my part you know just absolutely a fantasy, but you bring up a good point because when you look at, I won't talk about uh her too much but you know Empress Wu Zetian the only Empress Regent of China where she, in her own name, became the title of Emperor was actually a really stable time. So it's like self-defeating you have all of these these customs, I won't say men, but all these customs in place that are setting up an Empress Dowager to fail and so you're doing it to the empress Dowager or you know and then you're saying it's her fault

Jude: I would say a lot of the Empress Dowagers, there was one Later Han one that did well, Dowager Deng Sui, who at one point, the court just decided to let her rule and quietly ignore the emperor who'd become of age. But generally what you had in these situations were basically a young woman who suddenly got power but they had to rely on eunuchs, who were hated, and their own relatives. Who we're going to be key supporters and naturally with your own relatives they may be good men or they may be unreliable and what they did would then impact the way the Dowager was seen and the Dowager was always going to be seen as important legitimate role but always with a bit of suspicion in that if she seemed too powerful or if any scandal. It was very, even at the best of circumstances, it could be quite difficult for a Dowager to sort of have a legitimate hold on power.

Cat: Well yeah but I mean it's not like the Empress Dowager having her family in charge, you know giving her family roles and power, it's not like male rulers didn't do that.

Jude: Oh no it wasn't, I didn't mean that is a criticism, it made a completely logical sense. It was how the system was set up as well

Cat: Absolutely

Steve: There's more it leaves them vulnerable doesn't it? So take the Dowager in this example Empress He, she was in a position where because of the way China was set up she couldn't run the armies and so she was reliant on her two brothers who she gave military authority to to run the armies and so she was all very reliant on them staying loyal to her in a way that perhaps male authority figures weren't. Because if they removed their son or stepson or brother-in-law or whoever it was from a position of authority they probably had their own military force under their own private command which Empress He wasn't in a position to have. I think that wasn't it Jude?

Jude: Yes that's what I meant is, they had to lean on their family because of the way the structure was set up.

Steve: How is Dowager He presented?

Cat: They set her up as jealous to begin with, they set her up as killing the concubine who gave birth to the other son who might, you know, end up being Emperor in lieu of her child. That's another kind of a trope you see a lot about women's jealousy poisoning each other and and you know vying for that kind of thing and so that's how you know by putting in a story about how she has committed some jealous act, might have happened in history not sure?

Jude: It did happen in history but the problem with that is it doesn't necessarily mean she actually killed the woman. It could, with complications of childbirth, and then sort of "oh the rivals dead it must have been killed by the empress who's known to be jealous" which is a very there's a lot of tropes you get around harems and such like.

Cat: There's actually, I don't know if you know this, but some of some of my friends and I developed the Chinese Historical Trope Bingo game where we have these Bingo cards to fill out different tropes: like you know jealous woman poisons other you know woman who gave birth to another. You know a ruler or politician vomits blood and dies

Steve: Liu Bei cries

Cat: Right exactly nothing wrong with crying, nothing wrong with crying

Steve: Absolutely not, it's just we commented in a previous episode that Liu Bei always cries in the novel but in history he's described as being someone that shows very little emotion

Cat: So he cries in history, like you know, when he cries when his thighs are fat

Steve: I mean every guy cries when their thighs are fat

Cat: Yeah I mean can't blame them. You know we're totally in support of men showing their emotions. Though now that point is you know, that was not considered crying was considered heroic in ancient China. It was not considered too emotional or you know that kind of thing you cried

Steve: The witness of the British stiffer upper lip, men crying has become a negative thing. I don't think that has been the case for most of history in most of the world. It's a weakness of British culture spreading but that's definitely a conversation for another day.

So what we've been doing there is discussing the relationship of the eunuchs and the empress and one of the things that we've picked on, but let's make it explicit and let's think about it further: It seems very wrong that He Jin is on the side of the court officials rather on the side of the eunuch and his sister which is where you would naturally find him and you would presume. So in the novel, in this chapter, he's presented as arrogant with a sense of invulnerability: is that how he was like in history?

Jude: No actually, one of the criticisms of him in history is the opposite. Whereas the novel he's arrogant and the blunderhead who won't listen to anyone, the criticism of him in the historical texts is he's too in awe of the eunuchs because of his lowly background, that he's indecisive and can't seize the moment because he just looks at the glamour and the rank of the eunuchs and it holds him back. Which is quite an interesting switch around

Cat: Yeah, I wouldn't call myself a He Jin apologist by any means but I do think that he, the situation he found himself in with everything kind of collapsing around him and you know he's like I am the son of a butcher. But you know that he did have all of this power put on him, he had two sides tugging on him and I think you know he, as opposed to just kind of necessarily being arrogant, wanting power for himself and his side I think he might have been legitimately trying to keep the Empire from falling apart.

Steve: That's interesting, so if he's trying to keep the Empire from falling apart, which I agree with you, why do you think he thought that getting rid of the eunuchs was a good idea?

Cat: Based on the novel and what's written in history, we do see the eunuchs building their mansions and corrupting everything and essentially or not even essentially but they say it straight out causing the Yellow Turban Rebellion. So you of course you'd want to get rid of the eunuchs

Jude: I think one thing that sort of strikes me, he gets a lot of criticism for decisions he makes during this fight but I think the biggest mistake he made was actually picking this fight. The Gentry leaders like Yuan Shao played on his sense of inferiority, that if he did this one task if he used his authority and popularity with the troops to get rid of the eunuchs, he would be a hero across around the land, he would be remembered as the guy who had got rid of this big threat to the Han. And it must have to be said, while the eunuchs were never, not usually a one cohesive group but had several of their own little factions, there had been moves against him by some eunuchs in the past. So that means

Steve: So it was a case of self-preservation to some degree the eunuchs were trying to move against him, maybe he's scared of his authority

Jude: Just a few eunuch just a few eunuchs I think a lot of them were quite happy to speak with He Jin until he tried to kill them

Steve: Yes

Cat: There was even that eunuch who helped He Jin escape, Guo Sheng.

Steve: Yes so that's really helpful to remember isn't it that not every eunuch were working towards the same goals, just as it's important to remember that not every member of the nobility were working together. They would have been different factions in each subgroup who would have had different ideas of what was best.

Okay so we've got these two sides opposing each other and in this chapter we see them go to war and I think it's fair to say both sides lose. He Jin dies, almost all of the eunuchs die and does someone want to tell us what happened in history, what went wrong?

Jude: For team He Jin, they tried a lot of different tactics to get the eunuchs out. He Jin was rather reluctant to go for the whole storm the palace and kill them all approach, because he wasn't decisive enough or he wasn't a complete psychopath, take your pick. So they tried appointing uh anti-eunuchs figures like Yuan Shao into important investigative roles to put pressure on: going "oh look we're talking to your servants we're looking at where you got this money from"

Steve: Sadly he was a maniac

Cat: Yeah

Jude: Yes, Yuan Shao had run escape lines against the eunuchs and Wang Yun, who was another key appointee, had nearly been killed by the eunuch so it may have been more than a tad bitter about that one. For some reason the eunuchs did not see this as a fair and above board investigation by neutral parties.

But the other method which we'll get into in the next section was sending out troops and summoning armies which did work in scaring the eunuchs but that may have also had something to do with one officer decided to set fire to a nearby town with everyone in the capital would see during that night. That had an intimidating effect but what went horribly wrong for He Jin was the eunuchs did actually resign and then something leaked out, we don't quite know what what it could have been Yuan Shao forging orders to the provinces to arrest their families, it could have been something He Jin was doing but something leaked out and eunuch unresigned. Which forced He Jin, since the eunuchs were not going to resign again, He Jin had to go to the Dowager and go "I want to kill the eunuchs"

Steve: And what did she say?

Jude: She said no unsurprisingly given her track record, she'd still saw them as an important support arm to her. But the eunuchs overheard this and for some reason they decided to kill He Jin.

Steve: Cat, would you read He Jin's poem for us?

Cat: The Han will fall, its star-told fate fulfilled,
With feckless He Jin counselling the king.
Deaf to honest words, he seals his doom:
Quartered in the queen's receiving room

Steve: And whilst you could understand why they thought that that was a good idea, perhaps it wasn't wise because ultimately, I suggest, He Jin was the restraining factor on his faction and when he died it all went very very wrong for the eunuchs.

Cat: I mean was that because of He Jin's faction or was that because Yuan Shao saw it as an opportunity to, you know, raid the palace and kill two thousand people? Because I'm thinking Yuan Shao was trying to find a way to get an excuse to raid the palace and kill the eunuchs and 2000 other people.

Jude: I think that's a legitimate question to be honest, given he kept pushing for, given the methods he'd gone to had not been entirely above board as I said forged orders.

Cat: Yeah for sure, I do not think I do not think you know Yuan Shao and maybe it's a reflection of how he was a part of the gentry, you have to look at in terms of who are the eunuchs actually hurting with their actions you know? Is there some farmer you know a thousand miles away really getting hurt by the actions of the eunuchs or is it going to be the gentry living in, you know, in a proximity or otherwise connected to the politics in such a way. But what I'm getting is I don't think Yuan Shao was going to leave the capital with the eunuchs alive

Jude: No, I don't think so either. Though I would say once the eunuch were dead what we're about to see is a land of peace and harmony of all problems solved Cat so stop being so cynical about the gentry's motives

Cat: Problem solved, gentry always looking out for the people

Steve: I'm sure that's how it worked in history. I'm sure that's true.

Jude: This was not the first attempt by the Gentry to kill the eunuchs. What had worked last time was they killed the leaders of the gentry faction, it settled down and then later they purged some more gentry faction members. The problem this time was the gentry remembered what happened last time so they weren't going to go "oh it's fine these promises that no one else will be touched will work completely, we will be fine". They don't believe that and another issue was that usually the Regent Marshals had not bothered with the army under their command. They would, do a few appointments the soldiers didn't really care about the Regent Marshals though but He Jin was unusual in that he'd took personal care of his soldiers and this time the soldiers were angry and out for blood, they saw his head and rioted

Steve: The soldiers had a great personal loyalty to him, it's remarked on a few times. I guess they saw someone like them succeed and that, maybe that was a bought out loyalty or maybe he just genuinely cared for them and had made decisions to make their lives better, the records aren't entirely clear but you do get the sense that the Northern Army owed him a great deal of personal loyalty which as you say was unusual.

Jude: Yeah it always amuses me that the reason gentry turned to He Jin was they saw that the army was loyal to him, they remembered that the last attempted coup had failed because the army deserted when the famous Commander was nearby.

Cat: Oh did you say a famous commander nearby

Jude: Yeah I'm sure this will have no relevance whatsoever, I stopped reading after part one!

Cat: Well there was that guy Dong Zhuo who might have had something to do with the the fall of the Han Dynasty not sure

Steve: Yes that's uh that's our next theme so shall we move?

Jude: Yeah sure

Dong Zhuo

Steve: Seems like a good idea. So just to help us segue in, after He Jin dies and Yuan Shu sets fire to the gates and it all goes very wrong, the emperor ends up having to flee the court and ends up in the middle of nowhere and in comes someone called Dong Zhuo. Now, what was he doing near the court in the first place?

Cat: So Dong Zhuo and some of the other outer generals who were keeping the borders, you know, safe from the barbarians were brought in in order to intimidate the eunuchs, right? Everything's in disarray, everything is absolutely out of control. So there's like a power vacuum there. And I think he just sees an opportunity or who knows, maybe a duty to go in there and seize power and decide who the emperor is, etc.

Steve: It does rather feel like using a sledgehammer to break a walnut, doesn't it? In terms of He Jin had the Northern Arm, pretty much the only military force in the capital, he was more than capable of dealing with the eunuchs, but he then summons all of the regional armies to come and intimidate the eunuchs further. And it all goes a little bit wrong because when He Jin dies, there's suddenly this vacuum of power. And he can't have predicted that. He didn't think he was going to die. But when he dies, there's this vacuum of power and someone has to fill it and it becomes this guy Dong Zhuo. What do you think of He Jin's decision, Jude?

Jude: It is possibly the... apart from losing when actually losing and getting killed, it is possibly when everyone thought He Jin really should be winning this because he had the army. It's this decision to call in Dong Zhuo that really drives a nail in He Jin's reputation. And the decision itself to summon outside forces was opposed by some of his advisors, it didn't lead to the mass resignations novel went for but there were one or two that did go, "right, that's it, I'm out. This is just going to be a disaster."

Steve: Hindsight is wonderful, isn't it? And we can see in hindsight how bad an idea it was, but at the time, there weren't the mass objections to it. So it's unfair to give him too much blame for it.

Jude: I should also point out that Yuan Shao also advised this as a course of action.

Steve: Yes.

Jude: Somehow Yuan Shao doesn't quite get the same amount of blame that He Jin does.

Steve: That's because when people think of Yuan Shao, they think of something that happens much later and he gets lots of blame for that instead.

Jude: And Yuan Shao gets seen as decisive in this as well. He's sort of the heroic, thrusting figure of action.

Steve: That is true. So now we're there. How did Dong Zhuo seize power?

Jude: When he got to the capital, historically he only had about 3,000 troops, his core companions he'd brought from the frontier. He couldn't bring an entire army with him, that would cause too many questions, but he could bring his loyalists with him. And when he saw the capital was in flames, and apparently not overly impressed by this, he marched in, discovered what had been going on. Then after helping put out the fires, there was a lot of uncertainty.

Steve: And so what did he do next?

When the Emperor and cavalcade come back, he has a confrontation with, that we'll get into, I think, in the next section. But while things are uncertain, he sends some of his men out of the city during the night, and then they come back the next day with fresh banners looking like reinforcements. And with the Northern Army now leaderless, they see a famed commander who's constantly getting reinforcements and they go to him. So Dong Zhuo becomes the biggest military power in the city.

Steve: Yes. So a moment of genius, to be fair, faking that he's getting more and more troops joining him is strategically brilliant. But I think I just wanted to pick up on the fact that I think Dong Zhuo works out something else here. He realises that whoever's in possession of the Emperor is the person who's going to fill the vacuum. So gaining more men is helpful, but he confronts the emperor before the emperor re-enters the city, doesn't he? So the emperor re-enters the city under Dong Zhuo's protection, which then means he legitimises himself as

being seen as the protection figure to the emperor, which then combined with the fact that he's in a strong military position leaves him as filling that vacuum.

Cat: You have to keep in mind that being on the borders, Dong Zhuo was one of the, you know, as opposed to the military leaders in the interior of the empire who, who did get some experience from fighting, you know, the yellow turbans, Dong Zhuo was out there for his entire career fighting like the Xianbei or, you know, other nomadic forces who were constantly trying to get past the borders. So he was a, I don't want to say a real military leader, but he was far

Steve: I think you can say that. Compared to Yuan Shao, for example, he actually was a real military leader.

Cat: Right, exactly. So he had the experience and I think other people might have known that he had the experience. However, at the same time, those types of generals had a reputation of almost being barbarians themselves, being outsiders. Who knows if maybe they're right?

Steve: I think that's particularly interesting when it comes to Dong Zhuo himself, because he came from the most western province of China, which was constantly in danger of being overrun by the Xianbei and at various times in the Han dynasty's history, there had been talk of just giving up on that province, just letting it go, because it's not worth the money, not worth the expenditure to keep investing in it. And that meant that people from that province, as I said, including Dong Zhuo, were not really seen as properly Chinese. And from his perspective, he probably thought that the only way to secure his home, to make sure it stayed part of the Han dynasty, was to seize power himself.

I do think that that's a motivation that we can see for Dong Zhuo's actions in terms of seizing power that I think is underappreciated and perhaps gives us some understanding of why he at this stage was behaving how he did. Now later on, it's harder to defend his actions, but at this point I can see why he wants to gain authority and it might not be for entirely selfish reasons.

Jude: I think one of the things the novel does, and it's a change from earlier fiction, is that it makes Dong Zhuo an incompetent. The one campaign we've seen him in is the Yellow Turban one where he does badly and has to be rescued, it expressly links him with the eunuchs and that he'd pretty much been promoted due to bribery and corruption. But historically, as you've both mentioned, he was a leading general: he fought over 100 battles in the North, he was a skilled archer, very strong.

Steve: You mean he wasn't just really, really fat like the Koei games present him as?

Cat: Novel also presents him as fat. History also presents him as fat. So there's been fat shaming for 2000 years here.

Jude: Look, the fat will later become a really, really useful guide to the cost of living.

Cat: Right!

Steve: Doesn't he, I might be wrong here, but doesn't he put on weight once he arrives at the court? My understanding is that when he arrives at court, he is in pretty good shape and then he enjoys a luxurious living and his good lifestyle of being an archer and stuff goes out the window because he's eating too much food and not doing enough exercise. Is that fair?

Jude: That's kind of the impression I got actually. I think it is more that he may have always been large and then grown rather corpulent over time. But in the earlier fictions of Pinghua, it starts with him fat, but he can still run faster than a horse, he's a mighty warrior.

Steve: He can run faster than a horse. I feel like that might be an exaggeration in the sources.

Jude: Yeah. It was trying to present him as a mighty champion, even if he's evil.

Steve: But I understand what you're getting at. In the sources, he is a military man who is competent. I would suggest at the point he comes into the capital, there are maybe three other generals in China that have a standing similar to him. Huangfu Song, who we've mentioned a few times, maybe Sun Jian and a guy called Ding Yuan, who we're going to come up to in a few moments' time. But they're really the only three that have got the same kind of standing as Dong Zhuo, aren't they?

Jude: I think as a general from the frontier, where he would have been looked down on for being a frontiersman: there were insults that possibly were written after he became a tyrant, but there were insults about his possible lineage. Also, as a general, he had been aware that being a Han general was a bit of a risky business. There were plenty of successful generals who'd been jailed, executed, fallen into disgrace.

Cat: Well, that's how you know someone's a hero in Chinese history.

Han Princes

Steve: Let's discuss what happened to the Imperial boys.

Jude: They and the eunuchs flee the capital. What with it being on fire, troops rampaging and all such.

Steve: It's a reasonable response, isn't it? I think if my home was on fire, running away probably would be my first reaction.

Jude: And while Dowager He ends up with the attacking forces, the emperor and his younger brother are with the eunuchs as they try to flee to safety. Eventually, Lu Zhi does kind of spot that they're missing and sends a posse after them. Well, when the eunuchs are caught up to, the eunuchs are either killed or they drown with some of the leading eunuchs urging the emperors to take care of themselves and warning that this will lead to chaos.

Cat: It's one of my favourite tropes in Chinese, you know, going back to ancient Chinese history trope bingo is when a force or a group of people are so afraid that they jump into the river and drown.

Steve: So the emperor and his brother are fleeing the capital. The eunuchs have kind of left them there. Are they alone in the wild? They are in the novel, aren't they? Is that how it worked in history?

Jude: There is a rather lovely image of fireflies leading them to safety actually they would follow the fireflies to refuge.

Cat: I think the fireflies kind of goes to show. So we do see later that Emperor Xian is portrayed as the more competent between the two. And something I think that has kind of forgotten, a lot of the time, in the more modern like communist interpretation or the more modern Western interpretations of the novel is this idea of the celestial properties of the, you know, the Son of Heaven. And so I feel like even though clearly Dong Zhuo put this kid on as a puppet, you know, Luo Guangzhong is still going to want to show that he's probably still actually the chosen Son of Heaven. And you can see it because they've got the fireflies, you have him being more competent. You don't want to go so far as to say this emperor was a puppet.

Steve: So although the novel presents Dong Zhuo's decision to replace the emperor with his brother as a negative decision, it doesn't want to present the new emperor negatively because actually for religious reasons he needs to be seen as a legitimate emperor in his own right. That's what you're saying?

Cat: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, religious, political, whatever. But yeah, he can't be, Emperor Xian cannot be portrayed as a false emperor.

Jude: Yeah, I mean, so you see it in the flight. It's the younger brother who's constantly urging we need to move. Oh, look, here's the refuge. Whereas the older brother who's meant to be the emperor and thus this figure of authority is constantly scared, is constantly sort of paralysed with fear. It's the younger brother who gets them into the refuge of the Cui family.

Steve: So the emperor doesn't handle the situation well, but through the actions of his younger brother, they end up in a place of safe refuge and a force arrives. And is that good news or bad news for the emperor?

Jude: On paper it's good news. I mean, welcome home! It's going to be better than the farmer's cart they're in and all that. The problem is if you don't know who the army is and there's just been mass murders, you might be a bit sceptical that this might not be the welcome parade. The novel draws on the history in the reaction to the Emperor's reaction to this strange force, this Dong Zhuo's forces. He's terrified, he's frightened, he says nothing. What they can get out of him on the account is just garbled and unclear. It's the younger brother who once more shows leadership.

Steve: Interesting because it would have been tempting or you might have thought that all of this was just propaganda from Dong Zhuo to justify putting a younger person on the throne who might be able to control easier. But maybe he was able to build on stuff that was already there.

Jude: Yeah, I think it's hard to tell whether it's complete propaganda like Dong Zhuo had really successfully knitted to get this tale to justify, sorry, sort of justify the changes he makes.

Steve: But not sure he manages to successfully justify it. But he manages to come up with an excuse, doesn't he?

Jude: Yeah. The idea that sort of we get this kind of weird image of both that sort of Dong Zhuo's plan is completely illegitimate and wrong, but also like, but it's the right change of emperor in that one son is weak, the other one turns, it's clearly better suited. You can't get that weird mismatch.

Cat: Like what I was trying to get at in terms of this being propaganda or is this just something that was added in order to make it look like there was not this time during the Han dynasty where it was ruled by this false emperor. Like yeah, propaganda for you know, less like Dong Zhuo making this rational decision, but more like, well, clearly you see these two, which one is the son of heaven? It's this one. So I was just putting the rightful emperor, the heaven-chosen emperor on the throne.

Steve: And therefore, although Dong Zhuo's behaviour isn't justified, he still doesn't have the right to make that decision. He still somehow, despite his bad motivations, is acting in accordance with heaven's will, is kind of what you're saying.

Cat: Yeah.

Jude: In terms of whether it's complete propaganda, Carl Leban does make the point that with the ages they're at, the emperor might actually have just been fully aware of how dangerous this situation was and probably quite traumatised. The younger kid, you know, how it can be completely oblivious to the dangers they're in.

Steve: The naivety of youth.

Jude: A lot of propaganda feels, I suspect basically Dong Zhuo just said what he wanted. I mean

Cat: of course

Jude: He's replacing an 18 year old who's about soon enough going to be old enough to rule with a nine year old.

Cat: Right. Yeah,

Jude: I'm sure I'm sure he had no self-interest in that at all.

Cat: No, not at all. Clearly this, you know, nine year old genius.

Ding Yuan vs Dong Zhuo

Steve: Let's get back to this theme of Dong Zhuo seizing power.

So he's come up to the court and he's kept on having more of his men appear. So it looks like he's got a far bigger force than he has. And the Northern Army who were following He Jin are bereft, aren't they? They've lost their leader. So what do they do? Who do they follow and who could they have followed?

Jude: Not that many actually. Both He brothers were dead, so that left that. There were a few people with military experience, but the Western Garden Army that Emperor Ling had tried to set up, that had collapsed and been absorbed by He Jin. So the main rival militarily wise seems to have been Ding Yuan, who'd been given security at the capital in the aftermath of the fires and the massacres.

Steve: So were Yuan Shao Shao never an option for the Northern Army, do you think?

Jude: It never really sets him up as one. I think the issues he would have had was he was not the head of his family and he can't set himself up above his uncle. Also, he kind of waited to see what was going to happen.

Steve: So he was really decisive when He Jin was the one that had to carry the consequences of it. But the moment it falls on his shoulders, he hesitates, which is something we're going to see later.

It doesn't appear that anyone from within the He action steps up and presents a credible option for the Northern Army to follow. We don't know why. So instead, they all defect en masse to supporting Dong Zhuo, don't they?

Jude: I think one possibility about why there wasn't more of a stepping up is, as well as basically every major political leader other than Yuan Wei would seem to be dead at this point, that those who are left have probably had quite a shock. Just imagine, normal day, yeah, some violence happens at court. That's not unknown. But you've just seen the palace on fire. A few days before you'd been watching from the city as a town nearby had been set on fire by armed forces. This must have been a shock to everyone.

Steve: The Empress disappeared, the Jade Seal's gone, the organs of government are in chaos.

Cat: And there's also something to be said about, we're talking about an army, the professional army of China, which has been trained to, you know, in a military culture. And the guy who's marching in is one of the real generals who's really fought and really subdued

wild, quote unquote, you know, people before. So there seems to me, there would be a certain attraction to Dong Zhuo as a military leader who could really put things under control.

if not, you know, an admiration for him or just a fear.

Jude: And if you're a soldier, Dong Zhuo is known to treat his soldiers well. He built loyalty; he would use the loyalty of his soldiers to avoid appointments he did not want to take because the Han court were worried that his soldiers were too loyal. If you're part of the Northern Army, why not join a guy you know who is a skilled general, You know he treats those under him well?

Cat: And also, Yuan Shao has just done something absolutely unhinged to the people you work for.

Jude: I do wonder slightly whether the soldiers really cared about that given they've just gone and set the palace on fire and looted it, which is really a bad sign for how things are going to go when your own army does that to you.

Cat: Yeah, that's true.

Steve: Okay, so Dong Zhuo has seized power. The Northern Army are working with him. What happens next? Is he left completely unchallenged, or does anyone try to stand up to him?

Cat: Well, doesn't Ding Yuan challenge him?

Steve: He does indeed. What does the novel tell us about Ding Yuan?

Jude: Not that much, actually.

Cat: Yeah, no, I think we're just supposed to think of him as like, you know, he's an imperial loyalist. He's loyal to the idea of, you know, the mandate of heaven and keeping the Han dynasty together, because it's been for, you know, 400 years. And so he's so...

Steve: He 's almost a plot device, isn't he? Although he's a historical figure, he's introduced in this chapter, he's killed in this chapter, we get given almost no information about him, so he's literally there, as you say, to represent an idea rather than being a genuine character.

Cat: Right, because Dong Zhuo has a banquet, because he's decided he wants to change the emperor.

Steve: How does he go about doing that? What's the banquet you were telling us about, Cat?

Cat: Oh, right. Okay, so Dong Zhuo is going to do this in a banquet by being super scary and basically spread the word that he will kill anyone who opposes him during this banquet. This is indeed a plot device where Dong Zhuo has this banquet. People are drinking wine and

you know, then everything becomes serious. This is also on the Chinese bingo card trope is the banquet.

And he says, we're going to change the emperor. And this guy, Ding Yuan, he's the only one who stands up in the name of the Han dynasty and the empire when everyone else is afraid of Dong Zhuo to say, we can't do this because the Han has been together for 400 years, and if you do this, it's going to ruin the glory.

Steve: So Ding Yuan has some cojones. But there may be a reason why he alone feels confident to stand up to Dong Zhuo.

Jude: There is, I should say, one person who speaks after the banquets to sort of back up Ding Yuan. Lu Zhi, the commander who'd warned against Dong Zhuo arriving.

Steve: Of course. And we met him back in chapter one, didn't we? Because he was one of the commanders, one of the three commanders that fought against the Yellow Turbans.

Jude: Lu Zhi says that, well...emperors had been dethroned before. These were not the right circumstances to do it. Dong Zhuo was no hero of old, he was newly arrived to court and that any without, if it was not done in the right circumstances, it was an act of treason. Basically accusing Dong Zhuo of being a traitor, which he took as well as you'd expect.

Steve: and Cat says he was, he was wanting to depose the Emperor which is difficult to defend. So Lu Zhi is not killed because he's too well regarded, but Dong Zhuo wants to kill Ding Yuan in the novel. Why doesn't he?

Cat: It's just like a super scary guy behind him, right?

Steve: Behind him is the scary guy of the three kingdoms, Lu Bu.

Jude: He's currently standing right behind Stephen and is scaring both me and Cat.

Cat: I'll fight him. Come on, let's go.

Jude: Yeah, you fight him, I'll run the other way.

Steve: My money would be on Cat. I wouldn't fight her, not for a second.

So Lu Bu is standing behind Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo is going to kill him and he changes his mind because he's scared of Lu Bu. And Dong Zhuo decides that there is one way to secure his position and that's to recruit Lu Bu to his side which is how the rest of this chapter goes. So how does he go about doing that in the novel?

Cat: Well, this is where Li Su comes in.

Steve: It is where Li Su comes in. What does Li Su say?

Cat: He is a friend of Lu Bu and he tells Dong Zhuo that he's very brave, heroic, but not loyal necessarily, not smart necessarily. So if you give him cool stuff, he'll probably join you.

Steve: And that's shocking because in the novel, Lu Bu is presented as Ding Yuan's adopted son, isn't he? And so that's very unfilial behaviour. So we know that that's bad, that the novel says that isn't how we should behave. But does Li Su's plan work?

Jude: No, it doesn't work. Dong Zhuo gets slain and we all go home.

Cat: Yep.

Steve: History would be very different. But no, that isn't what happens. Jude, what actually happened?

Jude: Li Su persuades Dong Zhuo to part with gold, pearls and a very, very lovely horse called Red Hare that can run across streams, never tires, basically the ultimate horse. He didn't have any Ferrari, so you get a red horse. When Li Su meets with Lu Bu, they chat for a while, Lu Bu shows his discontent with his worthy master. And Li Su gently leads him on to the idea that, which will become a theme of the novel, that the wise man or the wise bird chooses his perch. And so a wise man chooses his master. And Dong Zhuo just happens to be this wonderful guy, he really adores Lu Bu and look at all these riches he just insisted Li Su take to show his appreciation of Lu Bu.

And if Lu Bu could just happen to think of something that might help Dong Zhuo, he would be most grateful. And after a while, Lu Bu comes up with a minor favour he can do for Dong Zhuo: Kill his master, Ding Yuan.

Steve: Not just his master, his adopted father. Shocking.

Cat: For giving him a horse. Can I mention something about Red Hare? That's kind of fun.

Steve: Please do.

Cat: Red Hare was probably a Ferghana horse, which is this horse that was from the Northwest, that was said to have bled when its sweat blood. This is actually because of a parasite, I think they really do. There's a blood that happens when they sweat. So the thought is that Red Hare was a Ferghana horse.

Steve: In history, how similar is these events to the way they're presented in the novel?

Jude: Not at all and zilch.

Steve: Not at all and zilch. So how does Lu Bu end up on Dong Zhuo's side instead of Ding Yun's side?

Jude: Rather sad for the Han. There's no mention of Ding Yuan actually protesting Dong Zhuo's actions. It's more he's the last barrier for Dong Zhuo's plans. And so Dong Zhuo

reaches out to Lu Bu, who's not an adopted son, and Lu Bu kills Ding Yuan in exchange for not a horse but rank, position at government, that sort of thing, which we were all here for.

Steve: So Ding Yuan wasn't a great champion of the Han dynasty. Instead, he was just a run-of-the-mill rival for Dong Zhuo, who he wants rid of, and Lu Bu kills him for him. I think another trope I just want to talk about whilst we're on the topic of Dong Zhuo, the fact that Dong Zhuo is... So we've mentioned that he's presented as being fat and not particularly good at military stuff. He's also presented as being completely politically incompetent, and we meet a trope that we will see throughout the novel where he has a strategist called Li Ru who he completely relies upon. Someone want to say something about that and about the role of strategist in the novel?

Cat: You know, it's almost like Dungeons and Dragons or something. When you parse, not only the novel, but kind of Chinese history too.

Steve: I love this comparison.

Jude: I still wasn't expecting that.

Cat: There are these different roles that people play. Like you have the strategist and advisor and you have the general, the warrior, and you have the leader and they're very segregated.

Steve: If you're good at being a leader, you're not good at being a strategist. And if you're good at being a strategist, you're not good at fighting.

Cat: Right. Exactly.

Jude: So in this case, Dong Zhuo is the admittedly inept but tyrannical leader. Lu Bu is the mighty warrior. And we see this a bit in the chapter, Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo have a fight outside the city and Lu Bu just charges Dong Zhuo and Dong Zhou's experienced army just collapses in a second. So it built him quite well, but Lu Bu is going to be that bodyguard, the mighty muscle, possibly not very bright or loyal, but the novel very much separates the meatheads, the warriors from the bookworms, the scholars who come up with the advice, the politics, the grand plans.

There'll be leaders who will set the tone of the regime, but it will be very much warriors and strategists that dictate the battles and the plots.

Cat: And there's a certain conniving personality too that fits in with the trope of the strategist.

Jude: Li Ru is a good character.

Steve: Am I right in saying he's Dong Zhuo's son-in-law?

Jude: Yes, yes, in the novel.

Steve: In the novel, yeah.

Cat: Oh, and then don't forget that Lu Bu decides to be Dong Zhuo's adoptive son. So switches that around pretty fast.

Jude: He is just very affectionate.

Steve: Yeah, if I was Dong Zhuo, I'm not sure I'd have accepted that based off of how the end of the last adopted father. Lu Bu is someone I would not want as my son.

Jude: I do wonder whether it actually would have even been possible to refuse though.

Cat: Right.

Steve: Yes, I guess if he's standing there with two halberds, you're not going to say, no, I don't want to be your dad.

Cat: Hey, dad.

Jude: Yeah. And look at this present I brought you. Look, it's still dripping with blood.

End Phase

Steve: Yes, that's a very fair point. Okay, so that brings us towards the end of the chapter. So, Dong Zhuo has killed Ding Yuan. He is now in a position of almost unassailable authority. And again, he says, I want to change the emperor. Is anybody going to be willing to take a stand?

Jude: Given the novel had to make up one opponent so far, you don't feel there's going to be much chance, but apparently yes.

Steve: Okay, so who does the novel present as the other person willing to make a stand?

Cat: Yuan Shao.

Steve: Yuan Shao. And as, hopefully, you're getting used to, every chapter ends with a poem. And this chapter ends with Yuan Shao challenging Dong Zhuo and ends with a poem about it. Cat, would you do the honour of reading that poem?

Cat: I mean, my favourite part is how they always end in a sentence that's like, what happens next? Read on to find out.

Steve: Absolutely.

Cat: But Ding Yuan stood for honour and lost his life. Yuan Shao challenged Dong Zhuo and stood in peril. And what was Yuan Shao's fate?

Steve: Well, you're going to have to read the next chapter of the novel and join us in our next episode in two weeks' time to find out. But for now, it's time for us to go.

So Cat, can we say a big thank you for joining us on this episode?

Cat: Thank you for having me. I love giving my opinions about things.

Jude: You're awesome. Thank you for coming.

Steve: It was our pleasure to have you. And in the meantime, it's goodbye from me.

Jude: Goodbye from me.

Cat: Bye.