

IRON WIDOW

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Zetian justified in being angry at Shimin for not letting himself be killed so that he would stop killing the female pilots he linked with? Consider that Zetian's world is one in which women and girls have internalized the notion that self-sacrifice is the ultimate virtue. Can you see her still being angry if she were brought up as a boy?
2. Zetian feels that public opinion about her is too negative to change and instead decides to capitalize on her controversial image. Can you think of any real-life parallels of female celebrities whose fame feeds off of controversy? Do you think we tend to judge female celebrities more harshly than male ones?
3. What are some of Huaxia's ideas and social values around gender roles? Do you see any of these mirrored in our own society?
4. Does Zetian truly give consent when she says yes to taking her clothes off in front of Gao Qiu? In a patriarchal culture, how much free will do women really have when making choices? How do you think our modern legal system would judge the case if she later accused him of sexual coercion?
5. What do you think would have happened to Zetian if she hadn't chosen to sacrifice her family as collateral damage in order to kill the Sages at the end?

ABOUT THE BOOK

Pacific Rim meets *The Handmaid's Tale* in this blend of Chinese history and mecha science fiction for YA readers.

In Huaxia, the highest honor for a young girl is to be selected as a concubine-pilot: supporters paired up with male pilots to power up Chrysalises, the giant transforming mechas that humanity relies on to battle the massive aliens that lurk beyond the Great Wall. But the honor often ends in death, and when 18-year-old Zetian's sister is killed by an ace male pilot, Zetian signs up to avenge her. The vengeance is swift, brutal — and unexpected, leaving Zetian labeled as an Iron Widow, a much-feared kind of female pilot who can sacrifice boys to power up Chrysalises instead of the other way around.

To tame her unnerving yet invaluable mental strength, she is paired up with Li Shimin, the strongest and most controversial male pilot in Huaxia. But now that Zetian has had a taste of power, she will not cower so easily. She will miss no opportunity to leverage her and Shimin's combined might and infamy, and survive attempt after attempt on her life, until she can figure out exactly why the pilot system relies so heavily on destroying girls' lives — and dismantle it for good.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



XIRAN JAY ZHAO is a first-generation immigrant from small-town China who was raised by the Internet. A recent graduate of Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, they wrote science fiction and fantasy while they probably should have been studying more about biochemical pathways. You can find them on Twitter for memes, Instagram for cosplays and fancy outfits, and YouTube for long videos about Chinese history and culture. *Iron Widow* is their first novel.

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