

Iron Widow Transcript

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Amber: Hello, my name is Amber. My pronouns are she/her.

Cass: Hello, my name is Cass. My pronouns are they/them.

A: Today we are talking about *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao. Xiran Jay Zhao is a first-generation immigrant from small town China who was raised by the internet. They are number one New York Times best-selling sci-fi and fantasy author and YouTuber with hundreds of thousands of subscribers. They write sci-fi and fantasy that is rooted deeply in Chinese history and mythology. *Iron Widow* was their debut novel. I'd just like to make a note that also their author's photo is in a cow onesie, which is just incredibly iconic and I love it. And also that their YouTube videos are fantastic! Highly recommend.

C: I saw them on Tiktok, and they look pretty cool.

A: Yeah! They're so cool, they do all sorts of traditional Chinese costuming that is both traditionally female and traditionally male. They're just a very interesting social presence, I really enjoy them. *Iron Widow* is a YA sci-fi retelling of the rise of Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in Chinese history. The series follows an 18-year-old reimagining of her as she avenges her sister's murder by an intensely patriarchal military system that pairs boys and girls up to pilot giant, magical mecha based on creatures from East Asian myths such as the nine-tailed fox and the meerkat. But in the system, boy pilots are treated like celebrities while girl pilots must serve as their concubines. When the story starts, Wu Zetian's sister has died and Zetian is determined to kill the man who killed her. In order to do this, she signs up to be a concubine pilot. After her initial plan succeeds in a way nobody anticipated, she is paired with a pilot named Li Shimin, the iron demon. As Zetian's abilities and power increases, she continues to learn things about both herself, the people she keeps closest to her, and the secrets the army and sages have been keeping from the world. The way this story is set up is the society is structured along the lines of ancient China, but with modern and futuristic technologies. People live behind the Great Wall, though it is known that humans live in other parts of the world past the wall. The army fights the Huinduits, who they have been at war with for two millennia. There are battles with giant mechas, political and social manipulation, love, revenge, and the actions of someone who is determined to change the world no matter the cost.

C: There are a few content warnings that more sensitive readers should be aware of. Some of those include violence, suicidal ideation, discussion and references to sexual assault, although there are no on-page depictions of it, alcohol addiction, torture, physical and emotional abuse, trauma, and foot-binding.

A: I was looking at the content warnings for this, I was like "oh, this is quite a list." Which I guess having read the book, I should expect it, but, wow. Alright, so this book is super juicy. Lots of good talking points. The first thing that I would love to talk about, though, is our main character, Wu Zetian. What did you think of her?

C: I think she was a very proactive protagonist. A lot of the decisions that she makes influences the outcome of the story. And you also can see that she's very close to her family in a way that she was very close to her sister, and she's willing to put herself through danger if it means avenging her sister as well.

A: Yeah, her character fascinates me just because I don't think we see a lot of protagonists that come at their problems in quite the same way. Most of what she does is a reaction to something else, like she goes into the pilot system in order to avenge her sister's death. Most of the big decisions she makes later are because she realizes something is wrong with the piloting system and wrong with just the way society is functioning. But when she does it, she doesn't do it like you would typically see a hero address something. She doesn't hold herself back from more violent choices. And even though ultimately I think she wants a better society, she almost puts herself in a position of being a villain to make that happen. She says, "it's not me who is wrong, it is everyone else," which is just a very strong position to come from, especially when you're very clearly in the minority of what you think is correct. Also, and this is, I think, just a good intro to the kind of person she is going to be like when she has her first battle with the man who killed her sister—when she comes out of the chrysalis, the first thing she says is, "you've been living in a dream long enough, welcome to your nightmare."

C: Oh yeah, I love that phrase. I feel like, honestly, I feel like if the book had any tagline, it would definitely be that.

A: It's just so insane to me. I was already excited about this book when I first heard about it. But as soon as I could tell that Zetian was going to— she's not somebody who holds herself back just because other people think what she's doing is wrong, which is so interesting to read.

C: I mean, we also are getting the story from her perspective. And obviously, we're going to going to see her as the heroine. But also you have to think about like there are plenty of times in the actual book where other people or society looks at her as a villain. And you know, later on, she does adopt this kind of label that society has put onto her and uses it to her advantage.

A: Yeah, she's just so interesting. I'm fascinated by her. And I really enjoy reading all of the stuff that she so chaotically decides to do.

C: Also, not to mention, she's not like the other female pilots, the other two that we meet, because the other two female pilots don't have their feet bound.

A: Yeah. And that kind of brings us to our next point. Wu Zetian is disabled, very specifically in a way that I have never seen in a novel before. But just in general, I don't think our main protagonists are usually so significantly hindered by something that their body is doing and that they can't control. Like we get it occasionally, and that's really cool, but this is was it just a very realistic depiction of somebody who always has to work around this physical limitation.

C: I would say that she does it very well, if not better than many other people in her situation.

A: Yeah. Also, the foot binding scene made me physically recoil.

C: Yeah.

A: I actually read this is the second read through of this book that I've had, and I forgot how horrendous it was. But I was like, I'm so uncomfortable. Just, it's very graphic, and it's painful to hear.

C: I think too, as well, like it's even more like impactful when you think about the fact that like, this is something that's real. It isn't just a work of fiction. This is something that has happened to women in the past.

A: Like I first learned about foot binding when I was pretty young. But I was like, Oh, that's gross. And I don't want that. That sounds painful. No, thank you. But like, I had never like confronted the reality of what it would take to do that to your foot. And the fact that it would, you would never be able to walk normally again.

C: It's essentially breaking the bones in your feet to make them into this small little petite shape.

A: Yeah. And Zetian has to like every time she has to walk, I think she mentioned a few times, it just feels like she's stepping on knives. And it hinders her ability to run. And she's so limited in what she can do by herself because of it, which I'm sure for somebody who is as strong of a personality is just very difficult. And I think it also is a driving force for a lot of the anger she feels. I don't think that, she explicitly said several times, it's she's so angry. And that's part of it.

C: And I think to like, because of that, it also means that she has to rely on other people. Like when she's in a wheelchair, she has to have other people help to push her around. And I think that's something that she really doesn't like initially want or welcome, but I definitely think later on she accepts help from people that she trusts.

A: Yeah, and it's really interesting to see that as part of her developing relationship with people, to just be able to put herself in their hands, even though I think by her nature, that's not something that she would do usually. Speaking of connections to people: one of the main selling points of this book, one of the main ways it was marketed when I first heard about it was that it features a polyamorous couple in what I call the only correct love triangle, because you can't have a love triangle if it doesn't go both ways, right?

C: It doesn't even make a triangle at that point.

A: It doesn't. It's just like a V. Nobody wants that. Especially in YA books, I think it's a very common trope. It's not necessarily a bad trope, but this is my favorite love triangle, because I'm always just like, you have two hands.

C: Yen has two hands, one for Li Shimen and the other one for Yizhi.

A: Yeah. I also, and this is more of an examination of their compare and contrast of the characters. I just really like that the characters, so Li Shimen is called the Iron Demon, right? He's this big, scary guy, and he's actually just such a softie. Homeslice just wants to write poetry. He's so sweet. And then Yizhi is this rich boy who's always wearing these really fancy, expensive robes, and he's pretty, and he's ready to fight for people, specifically for Zetian, but he is surprisingly violent, which is unexpected when you look at him. And I just think it's a really cool dynamic to have those two and Zetian all together.

C: I think Yizhi does things a little bit more behind the scenes. He has a lot of connections and a lot of networking. So I think Zetian and Li Shimin more, like, obvious kind of way. And they're kind of on the front stage while Yizhi is on the backstage doing the back end of things, which is a lot more quiet, but I think also, too, it shows their dynamic and how well they all work together.

A: And it's so interesting to me in this story that at one point, Yizhi joins them in the Chrysalis for spirit pressure reasons, because they're Chrysalis— they didn't have enough spirit pressure to keep going, I believe was what was happening. And he joins them and contributes his own key to it. Because of the

way the pilot system works and how if there's a concubine pilot that has a spirit pressure high enough to not die, it's always seen almost like a marriage. I'm intrigued that Yizhi became part of their team and was kind of accepted as that and they even made a seat for him in the Chrysalis. But, not that nobody ever questioned it, I guess, I'm just interested that he also sort of slips into that role.

C: I think people did question it. They had a lot of influence, be it good or bad. I think they mentioned before that like, they're kind of like the media's number one enemy. But that's good, because that means that they're talking about them. So I think in general, it was just kind of something they're like, okay, and they just kind of went along with it. Because I know initially, like from like the initial time that he lended his key, I think I remember there being a bit of like a story about it.

A: Yeah. I think what you were mentioning about him being sort of more behind the scenes and more subtle, I think people are more likely to look at him and like, think he's probably not up to things because he doesn't look as threatening as the other two. I just really like them. I think it's so refreshing to see that in general. And I just like them all very much, even though they make some morally questionable choices.

C: I think too, like, if we're just talking about their relationship, I think it is nice to see like a polyamorous relationship portrayed as something good and something positive. Like I'd go out and say that this is a very healthy relationship dynamic between three people.

A: Yeah. There was a quote when they like finally all accept the situation.

C: I think I remember that when, I believe it was Yizhi and Li Shimin, were showing like interest in each other. Like they kind of looked off to Zetian to see what kind of like, you know, what her opinion of it was. And she just kind of like held it made up a triangle with her fingers to show, you know, it's it's okay. And the triangle was essentially complete.

A: In this story specifically, shame and guilt is used as a way to control women. It's not just because there are elements of that in like the way different types of people are treated as well. But shame and guilt is a major way that Zetian is manipulated.

C: I think too, it's worth mentioning that it's while it is a lot heavier and a lot harder on the female side of things. You also get to see that this system isn't exactly beneficial to men either. We see it most with Li Shimin. All these pressures have been put on him and he doesn't necessarily like how the system is either. But he's also a pawn in the bigger game.

A: Yeah. One of the things we learned about Li Shimin is he was already in a bad place because when the army took him, he was a convicted murderer for reasons that are explained in the book. And he doesn't want to do the things that he's doing. He knows that something that I don't think was said explicitly is chrysalises are powered by the spirit pressure of the pilot and the concubine pilot. And if the concubine pilot spirit pressure is not high enough and it does not match the pilots, then she will probably die in a battle. And because Li Shimin's spirit pressure is so high, every girl that goes into a chrysalis with him dies. And he knows this and he doesn't want to do that. But because of his addiction, the generals are able to manipulate him into doing it anyway.

C: Going back to the original talking point of guilt and control, we can see pretty much throughout the book, women are only really valued on what they can bring to the table for men. So they could either bear children, they could marry an influential man, or they could become a concubine pilot. And I think in the book, women are scored based on their worth to men. It's brought up before that whenever a female concubine pilot passes away, like that's no big deal. Nobody really bats an eye over that. But when a male

pilot passes away, everybody's in uproar about that, saying like, "Oh, well, that was somebody's son." They never say "that was somebody's daughter" when a concubine pilot passes away.

A: Yeah, the pilot that Zetian, I think it's pretty early book, Zetian kills the pilot that kills her sister. And when that happens, everyone is outraged. All the other pilots are really hostile towards her because of that. And the generals are—they initially throw her in jail. But the reason that she's even in this in the first place is because her sister died as a result of this system. And we find out she didn't die during a battle, but it was is the result of women being treated as expendable within the system.

C: And then there's also this secondary layer of women's sexuality being controlled. It's constantly brought up the term "being a maiden," I believe it was, in essence, meaning that the woman in question hasn't had intercourse yet. And this is a big talking point. I think at least once is brought up by her father. She offers to be like, "well, you can check I'm still a maiden." And the idea that like, such an arbitrary concept is just dangled over women's heads. Like if you given yourself up to a man, well, then you're dirty, you're filthy, your family might even throw you out, or—I believe—wasn't it, drowned you in the pigpen?

A: Yeah. Because of that. Yeah, there was one character sort of like as part of Li Shimin's backstory, there is this the one female character who is assaulted. And so it's not even her fault. And the family, he's like, "I think the family drowned her." And it wasn't even a choice she made. It was just, she was no longer a maiden. And she so she wasn't of use anymore. I mean, this is horrendous, obviously.

C: It was like she was goods like she wasn't even it was more like property and the property was damaged, so to speak. So therefore, she didn't really provide any more value to the family, which is, you know, obviously, very, very horrific and very dehumanizing.

A: Yeah. And there's a point where Zetian realizes that society as they know it cannot function without women. And I think it's in a conversation with Yizhi's father, who is like this big media owner, who is a big part of creating their media image. She asked Yizhi's father why he hates women so much. And he's like, "I don't hate women, society needs women." And she realizes that society can't function without women, but in order for women to do what the patriarchal society needs them to do to continue functioning the way it does, they have to be controlled by way of shame and guilt, and their sexuality and in Zetian's case, physically restricted because of her feet.

C: So I think that leads into the next topic really well: the idea that boys are more powerful than girls.

A: Yeah, I don't think it is a shock based on everything else we know about this book. And also just as a human person, that this is not true. But it's something that's used throughout the book to justify a lot of the actions that are taken and to sort of justify the way that women are treated.

C: The pilots, the men, are honored and seen as sort of like pseudo celebrities, while the women are kind of unless they actually become lucky enough, which when I say lucky enough, I mean, it rarely ever happens, to become like a balanced match. The women are kind of like, to the sidelines and forgotten about. I would go off to say that most of the general population who's watching like these streams where they fight the Huntuns know the names of the male pilots, but really aren't at all concerned about the concubine pilots. What are their names? If they do end up surviving, they don't really get much glory from that at all.

A: And they're just used until they can't be used anymore. And the male pilots are praised for all that they're doing for the war effort. And the women are just forgotten about.

C: That actually transitions well into what you were talking about earlier, how society can't function without women. Well, a chrysalis can't function without a woman. So essentially, women are also a part of the equation. They take up the second seat. And without at least like a second pilot in there, the chrysalis wouldn't even be able to run. So, it is worth saying that they are needed in some capacity to be able to even power the thing.

A: Yes. And I will not say too much because it is important to the plot, but the concept of boys being more powerful than girls is, I mean, we know in real life, that's not a truth statement. There's just so much, it's so juicy, you've just got to read this book because, yeah, it's really good. But anyway, life lesson, boys are not more powerful than girls. Believe in the nineties' girl-power movement: Anything boys can do girls can do better. Just, not better, maybe better, I don't know!

C: At least equally.
[laughter]

A: So something else that is really interesting in this book is while it is one of the main concepts is the gender disparity, there's also a difference between different types of people. There's a people called the Rongdi, which are a tribal people that are different than the rest of the people in Huaxia. And they're a little bit more...

C: At least by society's standards, they're deemed as a little bit more barbaric and uncivilized.

A: Yeah. So they're viewed that way. They're usually in the poorer echelons of society. And on the flip side, you can see how poorly certain people are treated because of their station in society. And we also see that rich people get to just do stuff that you're not supposed to be able to do. At one point, they're at a party at Yizhi's father's estate. And there are these people just walking around in spirit metal, which is supposed to be restricted to army use specifically, and even the pilots aren't really supposed to be wearing it outside of their chrysalis, unless they're one of the high-ranking pilots. So there's just these different expectations and different rules almost for different people depending on where in society you fall.

C: It is worth mentioning too that we see that Yizhi's father has massive influence because of his financial standing.

A: And Yizhi, who we love, is only starting to realize how much his family's wealth really affects him in a way that doesn't affect other people. Early in the book, he tells Zetian that karma will come for the pilot that killed her sister. And she has this whole tirade about, "there's no such thing as karma or if it does exist, it doesn't care about people like me. Some of us were born to be used and discarded. We can't afford simply to go along with the flow of life because nothing in this world has been created, built, or set up in our favor. If we want something, we have to push back against everything around us and take it by force." Which, first of all, goosebumps, such a good line. But I think it also really explains a lot about her character and her motivations. But it's also just a really good example of the expectations that somebody like Yizhi who grew up in wealth has versus someone like her who grew up on the frontier.

C: I feel like that's the first time, at least from what we see anyway, that Yizhi is really confronted with this idea that there's some privileges that he has that Zetian and other women, other people who are not of the same class as him, don't have access to.

A: Agreed. Li Shimin is also a pretty good example of like, he has the highest spirit pressure of any pilot. It's a multi-faceted issue, of course. He is a convicted murderer, so that's part of it. And he's Rongdi, so even though he is extremely powerful, he is not treated the same way as other pilots who are less powerful than him are treated.

C: It's because he doesn't necessarily conform to the image that they picture of a chrysalis pilot.

A: Right, he doesn't look like their ideal hero.

C: In fact, I think I remember the first night that Zetian spends with him, she's really surprised at his living quarters because it's essentially like a prison cell. And she's confused because, well, this guy is the Iron Demon. He has the highest ever recorded spirit pressure, but yet he's being treated like a prisoner, essentially.

A: It's not just men who are perpetuating this cycle of the patriarchy. It is also women who are on the receiving end of all of these things that are also helping to perpetuate it.

C: I think the most powerful example of this happens to be Zetian's own mother. And she, I believe she was actually the one who went through the process of helping to bind Zetian's feet. And was her grandmother involved? I can't remember.

A: Yeah, her grandmother was involved in that.

C: So it was the two very influential women in her life were responsible for the thing that essentially disabled her. And I think that's a very powerful thing to talk about because it's the understanding that the control of women and taking women who are controlling other women is also very important in the system. It isn't just the men barking down orders of what they want the women to do. So it's kind of like a perpetual cycle.

A: Yeah, women just accepting this is how things are because that's how they were raised and just continuing that. I think, I mean, I think you said it very well. There's also other female pilots who encourage Zetian to do certain things that are more expected of women, specifically like compassion for people who have wronged her. And then it's used against her, which is something that that particular character knows will happen because it happened to her. So, yeah, I think you're right. I think if it was just something that men were doing, it would still be bad, but it's given more validity because women are also contributing.

C: Yeah, you kind of have to have them believe that this is the way that things should be and that they're meant to be inferior. Because without that, essentially, you have a bunch of women who can rise up. But if you have them all kind of like conform to this ideology, then you don't have to worry about them questioning the way things are run, or how they're being run by men, because they just accept it that this is how things are, and they don't really have any ideas or questions of rebellion because they've accepted that.

A: Yeah, definitely. The last thing we wanted to talk about is, sort of been part of what we've already been talking about, but, specifically the way media controls people's views of things. So, the thing I specifically was thinking about when I wrote this was Zetian and Li Shimin are, sort of— nobody likes them but the dislike them so much that they're like—

C: They're kind of like the black sheeps of the pilots.

A: Yeah. And they make such— they're portrayed in such a way that pilots are not portrayed usually. They do a photoshoot and the way that Zetian is portrayed is the way that women are not supposed to be. They're not supposed to be headstrong, and she looks directly in the camera, they're not supposed to be overly sexual and, the way that she's dressed and the way that she's positioned next to

Li Shimin emphasizes that. He is already kind of thought of as this scary guy so they sort of emphasize that as well. They make them people that are easy to hate, but in a way that makes people fascinated by them and intrigued by them. And I think the goal was to just keep them at the front of people's mind because they're not like everybody else. But, in a bad way, but in a way that also brings them views.

C: Like, if you really think about it, you know, people love to gossip, even if that's not what they're supposed to be doing, people love to talk about that "oh, they're going against the grain" like, it's essentially under the idea that any publicity is good publicity. They're not trying to make them look like good people. They're trying to play on the image that they already have, which—if I remember correctly—their whole idea behind that photoshoot was presenting them in a way that you don't really know and you have to question who is the one in control? Because the obvious answer to that question would be, "Oh, well, it's the male pilot, it's Li Shimin who's in control." But the way that they position Zetian and the way they shoot things makes you think maybe she's the one actually in control.

A: Also interesting to note is, the reason that they do this is because they reason that if they can make people look at them and if media is making a lot of money off of them, the money that comes off of that will justify the army not killing them. Because they've done a lot of stuff that would otherwise be a big no-no, and would usually get people, like, removed from the positions that they're in. But Zetian thinks that if they get media backing, then that will protect them even if it's perpetuating this image of them that isn't true, but which people believe anyway.

C: I think, because they're earning money and because they're so noteworthy, even if it's in an infamous way, I think too that because they're so popular, you know, people love to hate on them, they're also, like, wanting things to go their way from that. Kind of influencing the people with power, influencing their decisions due to their financial gain and their notoriety.

A: It's not enough that they're the most powerful pilots in the army, they also have to be somebody that the public is invested in. Final thoughts: this book is so good. I'm so excited for the next book called *Heavenly Tyrant* and it's coming out next year. There's just juicy stuff in this book. Again, we couldn't talk about a lot of it because that would be revealing too much, things that are supposed to be like big reveals, so we can't get into it, but especially the last couple chapters of this book, there is so much happening. Just, things you find out about the army, things you find out about specific people, about the world, it's insane, it's so good. And I cannot wait for the next book.

C: I was a little sad that, I saw that, I thought it was supposed to come out this year and I saw that it got delayed and I was like, "Man!"

A: I know! My understanding is that what Xiran Jay Zhao was being paid was not enough to focus solely on the books.

C: It was such a good book, so that's, really hurts to hear that. But, hopefully it'll be out at some point next year and we can rejoice and read it. And hopefully it'll answer all the questions that the ending brings. We don't get to talk about that, because we're here to tell you to read the book, which you should.

A: So... Oh my gosh there's so much going on. You already now that Zetian has no problem straight-up murdering a guy, she does that multiple times. And I just—

C: Girl-boss!

A: Right? And both of the guys she's in a relationship with would just follow her to the end of—Like, I'm very convinced that there is not a line that she could cross that they would stop supporting her. This book makes me feel a lot of things, I'm so excited for the next book.

C: So that's gonna go ahead and wrap u pour discussion of *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao. We'll see you next time when we discuss *A Taste of Gold and Iron* by Alexandria Rowland.

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