

Introduction

Kingdoms in Peril is an epic historical novel covering the five hundred and fifty years of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, from the civil wars and invasions that marked the birth of a new regime in 771 B.C.E. to the unification of China in 221 B.C.E. This period saw the numerous states that made up the Zhou confederacy riven by intense and intractable conflict as they lurched from one crisis to the next. Every concept of what constituted a civilized society was tested again and again through centuries of political instability, and any momentary peace was soon threatened by the relentless intriguing of ministers, eunuchs, and harem favorites. It was a time when political life was punctuated with poisonings, assassinations, and sinister conspiracies, and those who escaped other murderous attacks might still fall victim to warfare or the rioting populace. As old certainties crumbled and hierarchies collapsed, it was no longer possible to maintain traditional social norms, and new opportunities opened up for the intelligent and able. Men and women were quick to take advantage of this, testing the boundaries and seeking self-advancement in ways that would have been impossible in a more stable environment. As an international market opened up for talented individuals, clever men increasingly sought to build careers abroad, secure in the knowledge that their social and ethnic background would not be held against them in a foreign country. Women too resisted traditional assumptions that their sphere should be confined to childrearing at home, and found that they were now expected—at least at the elite

levels—to be able to provide sagacious advice, arrange murders, defuse political conspiracies, and, in the event of a crisis, potentially even to take over the running of the country.

Kingdoms in Peril was written in the 1640s, at the very end of the Ming dynasty, by the great novelist Feng Menglong (1574–1646). An expert in the history of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, he was inspired to write this novel by reading an earlier work on the same subject: *Tales of the States* (*Lieguo zhi*) by Yu Shaoyu (fl. 1522–1573). Horrified by the many mistakes and anachronisms this book contained, Feng Menglong decided to produce a new and improved account of the same historical events, which would explore the careers and personalities of the many remarkable individuals who lived through and defined this crucial era of Chinese history. In the course of the one hundred and eight chapters of the complete novel, he documents the collapse of the Zhou confederacy during the Spring and Autumn period (771–475 B.C.E.) and the slow rebuilding of civil society during the Warring States era (475–221 B.C.E.), which culminated in the unification of China under the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (r. 246–221 B.C.E. as king; r. 221–210 B.C.E. as emperor). Thus, overall, this novel describes a grand arc, from stability to chaos and back again. As a novel about politics, much of the narrative in *Kingdoms in Peril* concentrates on the exercise of power. During the Eastern Zhou dynasty, there were two words in use to cover different aspects of the concept of power. *Quan* was used for the power that comes from quantifiable resources: the size of the army, the financial reserves in the treasury, the extent of the tax base, stockpiles of weapons, armor, and so on. *Shi*, on the other hand, refers to power that comes from taking advantage of the opportunities provided by a developing situation. It is the interplay between *quan* and *shi* that provides many of the most dramatic incidents in the history of this period, and therefore of this novel. Power that comes from circumstantial advantage could be utilized in all sorts of different contexts: whether it is a silver-tongued diplomat persuading a king to accept a disadvantageous treaty; a cunning general tricking the enemy commander into an unfavorable situation by playing to his prejudices; or a rival convincing a neglected wife to spy on her husband to set him up for assassination—these chinks in the armor allowed for stunning reversals of fortune.

Whether they were making history or being crushed by it, the characters of *Kingdoms in Peril* are presented in a way that reminds us of their human qualities. There are no heroes and villains here, just flawed individuals trying their best to survive in often impossible circum-

stances, all too often discovering that the choices available to them ranged from bad to worse. One of the key features of this novel is the emphasis on the terrible conflicts many of its characters faced—raised in an ethical system that valued loyalty, justice, benevolence, and filial duty and yet placed in circumstances in which they were torn between their duty to the ruler or the country and their love for family and friends. Regardless of whether they were monarchs, aristocrats, hereditary ministers, or clan leaders, members of the Eastern Zhou ruling elite almost always had complicated private lives, surrounded as they were by wives, concubines, mistresses, cronies, bodyguards, hangers-on, and hordes of servants, male and female. The ties of affection created within these households did not necessarily run neatly according to rank and status, where sons of the main wife held priority in the inheritance, followed by the children of concubines, while illegitimate offspring were generally treated little better than slaves. Although this social hierarchy might appear rigid, it could always be overturned by the intelligent; while ruthless ambition and violence occasionally found themselves tempered by loving relationships strong enough to withstand the brutality of the age. *Kingdoms in Peril* has long been recognized as a masterpiece for its exploration of the personalities of individuals caught up in momentous historical events.

KINGDOMS IN PERIL: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kingdoms in Peril opens with a brief account of the political problems at the end of the Western Zhou dynasty, which were allayed with the accession of the highly competent King Xuan of Zhou (r. 827–782 B.C.E.). However, though the reign of King Xuan offered a temporary respite, the dynasty would collapse in a civil war during the reign of his son, King You (r. 781–771 B.C.E.). The fall of the Western Zhou dynasty is today understood as the result of multiple factors: natural disasters created enormous social disruption and forced many people to become refugees; attacks by powerful northern nomadic peoples increased; and the ensuing humanitarian crisis was exacerbated by an incompetent government riven with internal dissension. However, this is not how ancient Chinese people regarded these events. For them, the key figure in the fall of the Western Zhou was an accursed woman, Bao Si, the favorite slave-girl of the last king. She was believed to be the living embodiment of an ancient malediction, imposed upon the people of Zhou by the Bao lords, and hence predestined to bring about the fall of

the dynasty. As a result, Bao Si came to represent a counterpart and antithesis to Hou Ji, the mythical founder of the Zhou royal house. Just as Hou Ji was born after his mother stepped in the footprint of a giant, and survived thanks to the protection of various birds and animals when his mother attempted to abandon her baby, Bao Si was born after her mother stepped in the footprint of a magical turtle, and survived an attempt to drown her as a baby through the intervention of the local wildlife. To an ancient Chinese audience, Heaven created Hou Ji to bring civilization to the world as the ancestor of the Zhou ruling house, and Bao Si was sent down to destroy everything that they had worked so hard to create.

In the year 771 B.C.E., Crown Prince Yijiu of Zhou, furious at having been dispossessed by his father, launched a rebellion against him. In the ensuing carnage King You and Bao Si were killed, together with vast numbers of government officials. The ordinary inhabitants of the capital were massacred, women were raped, and the city was pillaged by the crown prince's self-declared supporters. Faced with a burned palace and a ruined city, the newly enthroned Yijiu, now King Ping of Zhou (r. 770–720 B.C.E.), decided to move the seat of government permanently to the secondary capital at Luoyang. The immediate consequences of this decision were not necessarily apparent; however, it would gradually become clear that these events had completely destroyed the authority of the Zhou kings. With the center crumbling, violence began to spiral out of control. Over the course of the next few centuries, the states of the Zhou confederacy suffered social collapse and political cataclysm, from which no one would emerge unscathed. The violence spread outwards from each epicenter like the ripples when a stone is dropped into water. An assassination in one state would lead to further revenge killings, sucking more and more people into the maelstrom. The resulting political vacuum would result in popular uprisings, innocent people were slain, and foreign enemies invaded. Occasionally, an individual ruler and his ministers would try to make a stand and preserve the peace, but all too soon, that regime would pass away and the fighting would break out again. At the same time, centrifugal forces ripped the Central States apart, as power increasingly came to be vested in regimes more and more remote from the old center: the Zhou Royal Domain. This was a function of the way in which territory had been allocated since the founding of the Western Zhou in 1045 B.C.E. The political center consisted mainly of city-states, with limited opportunities for expansion. Over time it proved to be the

peripheral regimes—sometimes even foreign kingdoms—that showed they had the capacity to expand rapidly, conquering their neighbors and recruiting ever vaster armies. The precise number of states within the Zhou confederacy at the beginning of the Eastern Zhou dynasty is not known, since not all are mentioned in surviving historical records and some appear only in inscriptions on ceremonial bronze vessels that have been excavated in modern times. However, there are thought to have been at least twelve hundred states in 771 B.C.E., at the beginning of the dynasty. By the end of the Spring and Autumn period in 475 B.C.E., these had been consolidated into seven vast countries, whose rulers were powerful enough to declare themselves kings. During the Warring States era, it became increasingly obvious to everyone that unification was necessary in order to bring the violence to an end. In the process, the seven kings of the Warring States would fight each other until there was only one left—Qin—which proceeded to unify China. However, before bringing about the unification of China, the future First Emperor would have to face numerous coup attempts launched by his closest family members, as well as running the gamut of assassins sent by his enemies. In the process, he found himself becoming increasingly isolated and paranoid, setting in train fresh bouts of violence from which the world of the Qin empire would be born.

THE AUTHOR: FENG MENGLONG

Feng Menglong was born into a gentry family in Suzhou in 1574, as the second of three sons. As with other young men of this kind of privileged background, he was destined for a career in the civil service. However, in spite of numerous attempts to pass the necessary examinations, he consistently failed, as a result of which the stellar career in government that he and his family had hoped for never materialized. In 1630, at the age of fifty-six, his scholarly achievements were finally recognized with appointment as a tribute scholar (*gongsheng*), which opened the way for him to receive a minor official appointment in Dantu County, Jiangsu Province. Having successfully completed this tour of duty, he served for four years as the magistrate of Shouning County in Fujian Province, from 1634 to 1638. On completing this second term of office, he retired and returned to live in Suzhou. That his ambitions to serve as a government official misfired so badly would have one important connection to Feng Menglong's career as an author: each candidate for the civil service examinations was required to choose one classical Chinese

text for intensive study. In his case, Feng Menglong chose to specialize in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), a historical text that covers the events of the early Eastern Zhou dynasty. The fact that he never succeeded in passing the examinations should not be seen as a reflection of any lack of diligence, intelligence, or expertise on the subject: he would go on to produce three textbooks that would be regarded as standard works in the field for centuries to come. This academic training and specialism would prove crucial when writing *Kingdoms in Peril*. The language of the primary sources on which he based his novel is extremely difficult and requires many years of study to be able to read. A rigorous scholarly background can also be discerned in the structuring of *Kingdoms in Peril*. Feng Menglong was determined to produce a novel that was as historically accurate as possible, paying close attention to chronology (an issue of particular importance at a time when many states were using their own calendars), nomenclature, precise geographical locations, and so on. This attention to detail does not add to the literary qualities of the novel per se, but certainly serves to give readers the confidence that they are in the hands of a highly competent author.

Feng Menglong's place of birth was to have a very strong influence on his life and career. During the course of the Ming dynasty, Suzhou had emerged as the commercial capital of China. This ancient city, founded in 514 B.C.E., was originally constructed as the capital of the kingdom of Wu by its penultimate monarch, King Helü. Throughout the imperial era, it continued to be an important regional administrative center, and its location—dominating trade routes along the Yangtze River, the Grand Canal, and through the Lake Tai region—would make it the preeminent commercial hub where goods from every province of the empire were bought and sold. One of the many industries based in Suzhou was that of publishing, with numerous printing presses in operation producing everything from the cheap single-sheet texts handed out as amusing novelty fast-food wrappers to deluxe illustrated editions of the classics printed on the finest paper and elegantly bound for discriminating and wealthy customers. For an educated gentleman needing to make a living, becoming involved in the publishing industry was an obvious step. The majority of Feng Menglong's writings seem to have appeared before he was appointed to a government post in 1630, with the remainder dating to after his retirement in 1638. The dates of first publication of a number of his works are not known, and so the precise chronology of his development as an author remains unclear. However,

it is evident that Feng Menglong was an extraordinarily prolific writer who was far from confining himself to a single genre. His popularity was such that a number of works by inferior authors were published with his name on the title page; a great deal of research has been done by modern scholars to identify and remove these spurious works from his oeuvre, and hence they are not included in the list below. However, in addition to writings that were published in his own name, he also appears to have produced some anonymous or pseudonymous works, where an attribution to Feng Menglong remains highly controversial.

The reception of Feng Menglong's writings has varied enormously. While his short story collections have consistently been very much admired and widely read, other writings that he produced have much more patchy histories. In general, the fall of the Ming dynasty can be said to have brought a significantly more conservative regime to power, and during the Qing dynasty (1645–1911) the government would ban many of Feng Menglong's writings—and indeed a great deal of late Ming literature—as indecent. This would particularly affect the reception of his two collections of folk songs, many of which are sexually explicit and describe pre- or extramarital relationships in positive (and sometimes humorous) terms. These song collections were rendered even more unacceptable by the fact that many pieces were produced in the female voice, and in some cases have explicitly female authorship. Both the *Mountain Songs* and the *Hanging Branches* collections have been virtually unobtainable until very recently. The *Anatomy of Love* was also banned because of the supposedly pornographic nature of the contents—this collection too has suffered neglect until modern times, when reprints have appeared to at last allow people to read these tales of love and lust again. While these writings survive, the impact of bans on Feng Menglong's anonymous and pseudonymous works is much harder to gauge, since by their very nature, their attribution to his authorship is controversial and uncertain. During the early part of his career as a writer, Feng Menglong appears to have authored at least one (and most likely more) short erotic novel(s). This kind of text was subject to extremely strict legal prohibitions during the Qing dynasty and beyond, and hence their role within his development as a writer has not been properly appreciated. However, this part of his oeuvre is particularly important given that one text that has survived, the *Scandalous History of Zhulin*, forms the basis of the tale of Lady Xia Ji in *Kingdoms in Peril*.

During the course of the Qing dynasty, an abridged version of *Kingdoms in Peril* was produced by Cai Yuanfang, an otherwise completely

obscure eighteenth-century writer. His revised text, titled *Tales of the States of the Eastern Zhou* (*Dongzhou lieguo zhi*), proved to be enormously popular, to the point where Feng Menglong's original novel ceased to be reprinted. The difficulty of laying hands on a copy of the original text has served to confuse many readers as to the nature and extent of the abridgement. Most of Cai Yuanfang's changes are extremely minor, cutting a sentence here and a poem there. The most significant changes lie in the removal of much of the more sexually explicit material, which would fit with the conservative agenda of the government of the time and with changing tastes among readers. The present translation is based upon the critical edition of the text produced by Hu Wanchuan for the Lianjing Publishing Company as part of the *New Printings of Classic Chinese Novels* (*Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo xinkan*) series. This reproduces the only surviving copy of the first edition, produced by Ye Jingchi—who also published many of Feng Menglong's other writings—which is preserved in the Naikaku Bunko in Japan. The Naikaku Bunko collection of Chinese literature comprises many important Ming and Qing editions purchased for the library maintained by the Tokugawa shoguns, which have not survived elsewhere.

It is not known when exactly *Kingdoms in Peril* was written, and there is no date of publication given on the only surviving copy of the first edition. However, there is a reference in the writings of Qi Biaoja (1603–45) to reading a copy in 1644 on a boat journey back to his hometown. Some scholars have suggested that this novel was published as early as the 1620s, but this would seem to be extremely unlikely for several reasons. First, as a very popular author with a large and devoted readership, it is hard to imagine that a major novel by Feng Menglong could exist for twenty years without anyone mentioning it. The second reason is practical: between 1620 and 1630, Feng Menglong appears to have been fully occupied with other writing projects. He produced a vast body of work during this decade, and the dates of publication of these writings are known. It would seem unlikely that with such a packed schedule it would have been possible to make room for the production of an additional one hundred and eight–chapter novel, particularly one that required very extensive background research. Finally, throughout the novel, Feng Menglong refers to himself as “an old man” or “a bearded old man” (*ranweng* or *ranxian*). This term of self-address is also found in other writings dating to the end of his life, and it would seem reasonable that he adopted it in his seventies, rather than in his late forties to early fifties. However, it is certainly true that Feng Men-

glong was an extraordinarily productive author, and considerable work remains to be done to elucidate the full scope of his literary legacy.

The dating of *Kingdoms in Peril* is significant, because it suggests that at some level the writing of this novel should be understood in the context of contemporary political events. During the reigns of the last Ming emperors, the regime lurched from one crisis to another: the Great Jiajing earthquake of 1556 killed nearly a million people and reduced vast areas of the northwest to ruins; Wokou pirate attacks of 1522–66 made life along the southern coast of China miserable for one and all (including repeated attacks on Suzhou and the surrounding area); and the Imjin War of 1592–98 obliged the bankrupt Ming state to go to the aid of its allies in Korea when under attack by the Japanese, thus worsening the political and economic situation at home. These events all took place during an era of global cooling, which saw crop failures, widespread famine, increased banditry, and significant social upheaval as hordes of refugees moved from one place to another struggling to find a way to survive. It was against this background of ever-intensifying misery that a rebel commander in the northwest, Li Zicheng (1606–45), came to power. In 1641, he would capture Luoyang, once the capital of the kings of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, and execute Zhu Changxun, King of Fu (1601–41), the uncle of the last Ming emperor. In 1643, the last of the Ming kings of Qin would surrender the city of Xi'an, and Li Zicheng would crown himself emperor of the Shun dynasty there on New Year's Day, 1644. From these lands, formerly the site of the Western Zhou capital, Li Zicheng would march on the city of Beijing, to bring the Ming dynasty to an end. The Chongzhen emperor (r. 1627–44), trapped within the Forbidden City, realized his peril too late: the city was under siege. On April 24, 1644, having ordered his wife and concubines to commit suicide and after murdering several of his children personally, the last Ming emperor hanged himself.

At the time that Feng Menglong wrote *Kingdoms in Peril*, the dreadful end of the Ming dynasty had not yet played out. The imperial family died and Beijing fell to the forces of Li Zicheng only in late April, 1644. The power vacuum that this created allowed the Manchu people to invade China from the northeast—the first wave of troops crossed the border in May, and was followed by further massive incursions over the next few weeks and months. The Manchu conquest would take decades and cost many millions of lives; indeed, it was not until 1683 that the last remnants of Ming loyalist resistance were mopped up on the island of Taiwan. However, the imminent collapse of the Ming dynasty

would have been much on everybody's minds in the early 1640s, and this experience must have affected Feng Menglong's personal understanding of the historical events described in *Kingdoms in Peril*. Although no explicit parallel is drawn at any stage, and the author never mentions any contemporary relevance, it is because he does not have to. *Kingdoms in Peril* is a political novel, and it describes the exercise of power and the rise and fall of dynasties. When Li Zicheng was crowned as emperor in 1644, it was not by accident that he chose the city of Xi'an for this ceremony: this site was the location of the Western Zhou dynasty capital, and subsequently served as the capital for first the kingdom and then the empire of Qin, not to mention the Han and Tang dynasties. The legitimation of power by calling on the vestiges of past glory was a process that everyone understood—just as the rulers described in *Kingdoms in Peril* laid claim to the legacy of the founders of the Zhou dynasty, Li Zicheng wanted to see himself walking in the footsteps of the First Emperor of Qin.

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The narrative of *Kingdoms in Peril* consists of three elements. There is the main story, which forms the bulk of the text. When writing *Kingdoms in Peril*, Feng Menglong made use of every single surviving ancient Chinese text relevant to this period in Chinese history, and the narrative is constructed using two techniques: translation and amplification. On the principle that nothing he could invent for his characters to say could possibly be as striking and characteristic as what they thought of for themselves, Feng Menglong relies heavily upon conversations reported in ancient texts, which he has translated from the classical Chinese of two thousand years earlier into the vernacular language of the early seventeenth century. Sometimes, however, his sources do not provide enough material to work with, and there the author resorts to amplification. Thus, for example, in the earliest account of the confrontation between Lord Huan of Lu and his wife over her incestuous adultery with her brother, *Zuo's Tradition* (*Zuozhuan*) simply says, "The lord upbraided her." This is amplified in *Kingdoms in Peril* into a dramatic interrogation sequence in which the angry Lord of Lu presses his ever-more humiliated wife with a series of searching questions. In addition to the main narrative, Feng Menglong periodically incorporates quotations of poetry and prose into his novel. The presence of these literary works serves a couple of different purposes. Sometimes they act as a kind of punctuation, marking the end of a particular story sequence or

the final appearance of an important character. In other instances, these writings highlight some aspect of the narrative that the author wished to emphasize, or provide a contrasting reading of the events described. Alternatively, they are there to remind the reader of the ongoing cultural significance of these events in China: these people and their actions have a legacy in Chinese literature that should not be ignored, and they have inspired some of the most important writers and poets of the past two thousand years. Finally, there are Feng Menglong's own comments, which are indicated in this translation by italics. These are intended to clarify unusual terms that he expected to be unfamiliar to his readers, to explain things that occurred outside the time frame covered by his book, or to note the precise location at which a particular event took place. This geographical information was included to remind his Chinese readership that these dramatic and often horrifying events occurred right there where they were living in the late Ming dynasty.

Feng Menglong and Late Ming Literature

Feng Menglong was a major figure in the late Ming Romantic movement. This would have personal implications as well as giving a particular flavor to his literary works. As a young man, he is known to have engaged in a series of intensely passionate relationships with courtesans in Suzhou, most notably with a woman named Hou Huiqing. Their relationship ended abruptly when Hou Huiqing was purchased from the brothel in which she was indentured by a wealthy salt merchant. The sudden end to their love affair seems to have been a devastating shock to Feng Menglong, and one from which he took long to recover. Society in the Ming dynasty was heavily segregated, and respectable women did not appear in public, so their opportunities to meet and mingle with men who were not close relatives were very limited. This meant that men desiring female companionship had little choice but to seek the company of courtesans, who not only provided sexual services, but were also trained as entertainers—singing, dancing, and playing music for the enjoyment of their clients. However, these courtesans were slaves, often sold into brothels as children, with virtually no control over their own lives. No matter how beautiful, charming, highly educated, and talented, there was little chance for them of leaving slavery. Even if they were bought out, the stigma remained: their engagement in sex work made them part of a legally circumscribed underclass. It is for this reason that courtesans were the focus of much late Ming

Romantic sensibility, for these women embodied the tragic side of the commercialism and commodification of the age. Feng Menglong's writings are interesting not only for the great sympathy he expresses concerning the fate of these women, but also because he clearly spent time discussing their lives with them, and records their thoughts and opinions. The respect he accords these women by allowing them an opportunity to speak for themselves is unusual and admirable.

One key feature of the late Ming Romantic movement in China was the tolerance that was expressed towards more unconventional relationships. As love came to be seen as an adequate justification for pretty much any attachment, no matter how frowned upon in society as a whole, it became possible to present a wide range of unconventional lifestyles in a positive light. Chinese society was traditionally monogamous, but polygynous—in other words, a man might only marry one wife, but he could have numerous concubines and junior consorts. Some individuals would take the Romantic ideal to extremes, expressing contempt for any social restraints and adopting a completely hedonistic way of life. For example, Zhang Dai (1597–1684) would write in his “Epitaph to Myself” (*Ziwei muzhiming*) that he “loved extravagance, loved luxurious houses, loved beautiful maidservants, loved pretty boys, loved colorful clothes, loved fine foods, loved pedigree horses, loved bright lights, loved red-light districts, loved the theater, loved loud music, loved antiques, and loved flower and bird paintings.” Here, the maidservants and pretty boys should be understood as the focus of his sexual attentions, in the same way as the female denizens of the red-light districts and the male actors whom he met at the theater. As can be seen from the portrayal of unusual sexual relationships in *Kingdoms in Peril*, the author felt confident enough in his readers' engagement with these Romantic ideas to be able to describe brother-sister incest as an expression of true love. However, in *Kingdoms in Peril*, Feng Menglong does not shy away from documenting the appalling consequences of unrestrained lust—sexual obsession can lead to exploitation and abuse for the unfortunate victim, but worse than that, when these emotions afflict members of the ruling elite, there can be serious political consequences. In this novel, all too often, “love” leads to assassination, rioting, civil war, invasions, and the deaths of many innocent individuals as the situation gets completely out of control. As a result, *Kingdoms in Peril* can sometimes seem like an extended paean to the virtue of self-control and thinking through the consequences of one's actions.

In Feng Menglong's writings, women characters play an unusually prominent part, and they are accorded a deeper and more complex characterization than is often seen in premodern Chinese literature. The role of women in the history of the Eastern Zhou dynasty is not well-recorded, but wherever a female character does appear, the author makes every attempt to include her in the narrative in a substantive way. Hence, rather than portraying women as purely the ciphers—the unhappy victims of male lust—they appear in this novel in much more complicated guises: ambitious and intelligent participants in the government of the country, masterminds of cunning stratagems to turn events to their advantage, and persons of high moral values determined to preserve these qualities in the teeth of the dubious activities of their male relatives, as well as bewildered personalities who have blundered into situations far more complicated and serious than they can even begin to grasp. Some women are shown being as unrestrained and promiscuous as their male counterparts, while others strongly resent or suffer through the degradation of unwanted sexual attentions. The intelligent and strong female characters in this novel are every bit a match for their male peers. At the same time, the stupid and ignorant women are as just as dull as the worst of the men, and prove equally incapable of extracting themselves from the dangerous situations in which they find themselves.

THE WORLD OF KINGDOMS IN PERIL

Places

The majority of the action in *Kingdoms in Peril* focuses around the states of the Zhou confederacy, also known as the Central States, a civilization based around the Yellow River valley. This was a highly urban culture, found within vast walled cities, connected together by great highways. The people of the Central States lived either safely tucked away inside an array of moats, earthworks, fortifications, and huge pounded earth walls, or immediately outside the walls in suburban areas. The inhabitants of walled cities were “the people of the country” or “the people of the capital” (*guoren*), who formed the background audience for every public appearance on the part of the ruling elite. Although there was no mechanism for consulting the people of the capital about political decisions, monarchs and ministers were very conscious of the importance of their approval and support. Although far from being wealthy or socially advantaged, living cheek by jowl with

the lords and clan chiefs inside the great walls of the city, the people of the capital could play a major role in historical events, providing enthusiastic support—even rioting—to ensure that a favored candidate took power or that unpopular legislation should be repealed. They had to be constantly propitiated with favorable treatment, and in times of famine or unrest, they required further generous gifts, because if mobilized against the government they could easily overthrow it.

In addition to the city residents, there were also those who lived immediately outside the walls in suburbs. In return for paying less tax towards the maintenance of these defensive structures, suburban dwellers risked losing their property and their lives in the event of a sudden attack. Politically, these people were also significantly less relevant than the inhabitants of the city, and their historical role was accordingly more restricted. The suburbs were, however, the location of the official guesthouses in which much diplomatic activity was centered. Ambassadors or distinguished visitors from foreign countries tended to arrive with heavily armed guards, even military units, and were therefore not allowed to stay within the confines of the city walls in case they were intending to cause trouble. Quite apart from these city and suburban residents, there were other people who had not assumed an urban lifestyle. A significant proportion of the population would have been agricultural workers, whether based on small farms or on the great manorial estates owned by grand aristocratic houses. In addition, within the confines of each state, it was possible to find *yeren* or “people of the wilds,” who wished to live free of any government control, as well as bandits who had retreated to the margins of society, and nomadic or aboriginal peoples of one kind or another—such persons, individually or collectively, could occasionally play a major role in historical events. At the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period, many of the states within the Zhou confederacy were city-states, but over time increasingly such regimes were subject to conquest by more aggressive, powerful neighbors, creating the enormous kingdoms of the Warring States era.

The vast majority of the characters in *Kingdoms in Peril* are members of the ruling elite, and therefore they are to be found living in palaces, emerging periodically in order to attend ceremonies at the ancestral temple, to visit their hunting parks, or to go on campaign against their enemies. Other travel involved attendance at international meetings or blood covenants, designed to keep the peace between warring factions. When travel took place outside the confines of one’s own country, the most important associated architecture was the sacrificial altar, erected

upon a pounded earth platform, where agreements could be made and oaths sworn. Building such structures was an opportunity to show off one's wealth and ability to mobilize the resources of the population not only of one's own country, but also of one's neighbors. Meanwhile, within each state, ruling families in the Eastern Zhou dynasty took particular pride in constructing towers, and a great many significant historical events took place in or around these structures. Since constructing high-rise buildings was beyond the capability of architects in this period, towers were multilevel structures constructed on top of massive, stepped pounded earth foundations. From the outside, the tower might appear to be as much as ten or twelve stories high, but in fact, each part of the structure was only a couple of stories, with the impression of height achieved by building up the core on which it was erected. These towers quickly became an essential feature of elite life for the aristocracy of the Central States and their neighbors: they were a form of conspicuous consumption, which could be used to impress both subjects and foreign visitors; they allowed the aristocracy the privilege of quite literally looking down on everyone else; and they provided a luxurious space for elite socialization in a slightly freer form than the highly ritualized formal events held in palace halls or ancestral temples.

The action of *Kingdoms in Peril* is not confined exclusively to the Central States. Three foreign regimes are treated in some detail in this novel, in accordance with their historical significance. All three were located along the Yangtze River: the kingdom of Chu was based inland, while Wu and Yue occupied the delta region. To the inhabitants of the states of the Zhou confederacy, Chu was an exotic kingdom of fabulous wealth and apparently limitless resources, whose lands stretched in a vast swath southwards from the Yangtze, ending somewhere in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Chu often appears in *Kingdoms in Peril* as a counterbalancing regime to the Central States; although the two regimes were frequently in conflict, both sides are accorded a more-or-less legitimate position in their disagreements. Meanwhile, the kingdoms of Wu and Yue are given particular prominence in this novel thanks to the fact that an exceptionally fine body of early literature survives about the rivalry between these two kingdoms, which would eventually coalesce during the early Eastern Han dynasty into a truly remarkable epic retelling of these events—*The Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue chunqiu*), which is also the first historical novel to be written in the Chinese language. The dramatic incidents attendant on the rise and fall of the kingdom of Wu, culminating in the suicide of their last