

Title: *Iron Widow*
Author: Xiran Jay Zhao
Genre: Science Fiction

Reviewer Name and Grade: Aydin E., 8th grade

Date Reviewed: 03/09/2024

Iron Widow is a science fiction novel set in a fictional world inspired by Chinese history and culture. In a corner of Huaxia, a geographical area of this fictional world corresponding to real-world China, 18 year-old Wu Zetian signs up to become a concubine-pilot, half of a male-female pair piloting giant mechs known as Chrysalises, which are used to battle aliens called Hunduns who lurk beyond the borders of Huaxia in the uninhabited wastelands and periodically invade. Enlisting as a concubine-pilot is almost certain death, as most concubine-pilots, who provide *qi* energy to the male pilots, have their minds consumed by the male pilots and thus die after battles. However, Zetian's goal is vengeance: she attempts to get paired up with and murder celebrity pilot Yang Guang, who killed her sister not in battle, but physically. Despite her doubts after meeting Yang Guang in person, when paired up with him in a Chrysalis, she enters his mind realm, accessing his own memories of his abuse of concubines. After escaping his mind realm, Zetian awakes in a far more abstract realm face to face with Yang Guang in spirit form. Her resolve renewed, she ultimately defeats Yang Guang in a harsh battle of wills and absorbs his mind and *qi* energy, and finds herself in control of Yang Guang's Chrysalis, the Nine-Tailed Fox. After successfully battling the Hunduns in Yang Guang's place, she realizes that Yang Guang has suffered the same fate as the many pilot-concubines who have suffered under the pilot system: his mind absorbed, he is unable to sustain his own heartbeat and Zetian's goal is accomplished. After the battle, she is whisked by Yang Guang's unnerved and outraged male comrades to a command center, where she is questioned by high ranking strategists and told that she is an Iron Widow, a female pilot able to sacrifice males to power Chrysalises instead of the other way around. In an attempt to harness Zetian's power and control her, the army strategists pair her up with the infamous murderer/extremely powerful pilot Li Shimin. Zetian doesn't pass up this opportunity to combine her and Shimin's power to take the world by storm and destroy the deep-rooted misogyny entrenched in Huaxia society.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

Yes, the plot was extremely compelling and I was unable to stop reading!

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace of this book was just right. The plot didn't feel like it was slowed to provide excessive detail or sped up to finish the book quickly.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

I believe that it is best for Grade 8 and above, as this book contains violence, abuse, torture, suicidal thought, alcohol addiction and reference/discussion of suicide, and is not suitable for younger readers.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this novel to anyone who enjoys sci-fi/fantasy in the aforementioned age group.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

I believe that it is very important to note that this book isn't alternate history or historical fantasy; it is science fiction that takes place in a fictional world. Considerable creative liberties were taken in character creation and historical figures are in vastly different situations than real life. Additionally, Chinese culture varies drastically based on the region, and the author's depiction of Chinese cultural elements may not be entirely accurate. For those who are interested in accuracy, I would recommend searching for non-fiction sources.

Recommendation:

5 stars: I'm really glad I read this book; it was awesome!

I would give this book a 5/5, as it is written exquisitely and brilliantly addresses problems like misogyny, stereotyping, racial tension, and homophobia. For example, the people of Huaxia (Han) are somewhat prejudiced towards the nomads (Rongdi) who live in the wastelands beyond the borders of Huaxia.