

NOT YOUR EVERYDAY THREE KINGDOMS

非普通三國：寫給年輕人看的 三國史

Larger-than-life heroes, epic battles, cunning plots to steal the throne – the fabled history of the Three Kingdom's era has been told so many ways, it seems like there's nothing new left – until now. This live-action history tells the tale like it's never been told before.

The nearly mythical history of the Three Kingdoms era has captivated audiences in print and on stage for centuries. The characters and events feel so familiar, it's like you were born knowing who they were. But just like any other well-known story, there are sides that the history books won't show you.

This dramatic history aimed at young adult readers brings you the men and women of the Three Kingdoms era in living color, through “live” interviews and in-depth investigations into their deepest secrets. The book's three sections – “What the History Books Won't Tell You”, “Remembering the Old Celebrities”, and “Luo Guanzhong's Hidden World” – take us through dark corners we'd never find otherwise. Did you know that Cao Pi was an inveterate prankster? Or that the mighty general Zhou Huan came face-to-face with a ghost while on campaign?

Not Your Everyday Three Kingdoms casts away the old tropes, displaying our beloved but oft-stereotyped characters in this new light. In doing so, it accomplishes an amazing feat: It makes them human again.

Somebody Sue 普通人

A Taipei native and an ardent lover of history, the author first began posting serial content online under the title *The Spiderweb of the Three Kingdoms*. His energizing, dramatic style attracted an enthusiastic readership, and earned him the chance to publish it as a book.



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By Somebody Sue

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CONTENTS

Who's Who

What They Don't Tell You in History Class

Cao Mengde, Professional Homewrecker

Under the Gleaming Armor – An Interview with Zhao Zilong

The Worthless Military Strategist and the Inept Advisor

The Mischievous Prince Cao Zihuan

A Tale of Zang Ba's Days of Friendships Past

The Shanyue Catastrophe

General Zhu Huan's True Account of a Run-in with a Demon-Spirit – Legend of the Chong Luo

Gallant Souls of Days Long Gone

The Tong Pass-Jicheng City Tempest

Death Curse of the Sun Boys from Eastern Wu

Clever Kids

Heroic Knights-Errant, Doing It Their Way

Kongming's Life-And-Death Decision

The Hidden World of Luo Guanzhong

Children's Future First Choice – The Water Mirror Institute of Education

The Tale of the Four Lords of Liaodong

Utopias of Last Resort for Troubled Times

Big Names Abroad

Sweet Romance Among Men

Under the Gleaming Armor – An Interview with Zhao Zilong

Even if you don't believe Zhao Yun would come out on top in a Three Kingdoms popularity poll conducted this minute, rest assured that his name would be in the top three. In the hearts of Chinese people everywhere, Zhao Yun is a flawless assemblage of Chinese virtues embodied in a single perfect hero.

Zhao Yun is probably a good example of the Chinese idiom “a thing becomes its opposite when taken too far”; the internet response to his positive image features numerous posts from people keen to cast aspersions. Although he served as Liu Bei’s bodyguard, he did not hold any important position in the Shu Han state. Ridiculous theories such as “Zhao Yun was a woman” have even turned up.

In the face of so much rumor and unfounded gossip, I had a marvelous idea: if Zhao Yun could see into our world from beyond the grave and knew what was being said about him, how would he respond? For information, I turned to both Chen Shou’s “Biography of Zhao Yun” in Records of the Three Kingdoms and Pei Songzhi’s “Unofficial Biography of Yun” in his Annotations to Records of the Three Kingdoms, and have thus laid out for everyone the truest possible account of Zhao Zilong from Changshan, right from the horse’s mouth.

This piece originally appeared under the title “Under the Gleaming Armor – An Exclusive Interview with Zhao Yun.”

A youthful general riding a fine steed, wearing a white tunic and silver armor, his hand grasping a pike as he charges repeatedly into the enemy’s ranks. Isn’t this the picture that flashes into everyone’s mind whenever Zhao Yun’s name is mentioned?

For generations, Three Kingdoms adaptations across every type of media have proven themselves stories sure to please while Zhao Yun’s star has continued to shine.

Novels, Chinese operas, comics, and games have reified and repackaged Zhao Yun as a man exceptionally skilled in martial arts yet compassionate and tolerant, devoid of all fear yet highly intelligent. He rolls all the positive attributes into one person, satisfying people’s longing for the perfect hero.

But whenever something is taken to an extreme, it invites the opposite. With the information explosion of the internet age, all sorts of disparaging remarks and outrageous rumors about Zhao Yun have spread like viruses. Everyone is now thoroughly confused about what’s true and what’s not.

Who is the real Zhao Yun?

To resolve everyone’s doubts, I got in touch with the man himself, via highly unusual channels. *As to the precise nature of those channels, I am naturally not at liberty to say.* Now, please listen as General Zhao Yun talks about himself, in person!

(Note: For ease of reading, individuals mentioned in the article are referred to by their official names.)

Things Get Dicey in Hebei

Somebody Sue: General Zhao, hello. Thank you for finding time in your busy schedule for this interview. The *Unofficial Biography of Yun* states that you are “eight feet in height and imposing in appearance.” Seeing you today, this description is well deserved!

Zhao Yun: Not at all! Brother Sue is also tall and handsome.

Somebody Sue: Oh, do you think so? Yes, well... It could be said that General Zhao is a household name in the Chinese-speaking world, the story of your life’s achievements having been shared with each new generation. What are your thoughts on this?

Zhao Yun: My thanks for everyone's great kindness. In truth, I am embarrassed to accept such praise. I merely did my best to carry out the former emperor's and the prime minister's orders. I have given little thought to matters beyond that.

Somebody Sue: General Zhao, you're too modest. Could we first discuss your life before your career? I believe everyone is quite curious.

Zhao Yun: All right. I come from Ji Province, north of the Yellow River. My home lay in Changshan Commandery, Zhending County (today's Zhengding County, Hebei). After King Wuling of Zhao instituted the policy of "Hu attire and shooting from horseback in battle," all those who lived in You and Ji Provinces, men and women alike, proved skilled horsemen. As a result, I learned from a young age all there was to know about the habits and characteristics of horses. Furthermore, our dealings with the Xiongnu and Wuhuan tribes required the Han and Hu peoples who lived together in Chongshan to study every style of martial art and to wield every kind of edged weapon.

Somebody Sue: I have another question. Are there lots of beautiful women in Ji Province? Doesn't the opening verse of an ancient poem say, "The beautiful women of Yan and Zhao are many"?

Zhao Yun: A true man's character is defined by his pursuit of lasting achievements! Is Brother Sue the sort of person to lose himself completely in feminine charms?

Somebody Sue: Not completely, just the normal amount. We should get back to the main topic. One could say that the Yellow Turban Rebellion was just the prelude to the chaos of the Three Kingdoms period. Could you talk about the serious impact this turmoil had on the final days of the Han dynasty?

Zhao Yun: Two years before the chaos, a massive plague occurred. There was a group calling themselves the followers of The Way of Great Peace. They arrived in Changshan, recited incantations for the sick, and gave them charmed water to drink. They saved many lives, and for this reason many people joined their religion. One day without warning, Zhang Jue, leader of the Way of Great Peace and their so-called Great and Worthy Teacher, called upon his followers to revolt and asked them to wrap their heads in yellow scarves. They attacked the local government offices and killed the officials while shouting the slogan, "The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will stand in its place." A scoundrel in my hometown, a man named Chu Yan, murdered and stole in the name of the Yellow Turbans, and a group of hoodlums and local ruffians followed his lead.

Somebody Sue: This Chu Yan you just mentioned, is he the one who swept across all the counties of Hebei, the boss of the Heishan bandits known as Zhang Yan?

Zhao Yun: That is correct. He most likely thought he could claim kinship with Zhang Jue, and so changed his family name. Zhang Yan's influence was truly astounding. His followers reached into the millions. I held a post in Changshan at that time and was responsible for organizing a volunteer resistance army. Although in truth there was little we could do, we were kept running back and forth.

Somebody Sue: But really, the Yellow Turban Rebellion was just the appetizer to the chaotic main course, which was Dong Zhuo's destruction of the empire. General Zhao, do you still recall the details of Dong Zhuo's corrupt politics?

Zhao Yun: Changshan was utterly ravaged after the repeated havoc wrought by the Yellow Turban bandits. Later, I learned from word brought by travelers that the Luoyang court had fallen under Dong Zhuo's control. The coalition army led by Governor Yuan Shao of Bohai Commandery (seat of the principal county magistrate in imperial China, located in today's Cangzhou, Hebei) had not only failed to suppress Dong Zhuo, but prompted him to set the capital city of Luoyang ablaze and force the emperor westward to Chang'an. Dong Zhuo was an arrogant despot with a penchant for unrestrained extravagance. At the imperial court, he killed indiscriminately, raped the palace women, and put large numbers of laborers to work constructing an immense fort, for which he received the shameful title His Majesty Castle. He also recklessly altered the currency system, doing grave damage to the people's private finances.

Somebody Sue: A magnificent residence and beautiful women, you gotta envy the guy!

Zhao Yun: Pardon me?

Somebody Sue: I said, Dong Zhuo, that treacherous bandit! He had it coming to him!

Zhao Yun: Many shared this thought. Instead, after the coalition dissolved, Yuan Shao returned to Bohai to raise a large army. For over four generations, members of Yuan Shao's family had served in some of the highest posts of the civil government. As a result, he attracted many followers and minor officials who came forward to great effect, yet he could not stop Dong Zhuo's savagery in Chang'an. Indeed, Yuan Shao drove his former ally Han Fu to his death in order to seize control of all Ji Province.

We despised Yuan Shao's conduct and refused to defer to his command. Our group reached a joint decision saw all of Changshan County allied with Gongsun Zan. Gongsun was famed for his fighting prowess. Even the warrior tribes of the border region avoided him at all costs, such was their fear. He commanded an elite troop called the White Horse Cavalry, its every soldier an expert archer and horseman able to hold off a hundred men.

Somebody Sue: I bet with Gongsun Zan's protection the people of Changshan felt a whole lot better!

Zhao Yun: This was admittedly a consideration. However, we placed even greater value on something else, namely "the Way of Benevolence." Only one who is benevolent can bring happiness to the people. We placed our faith not in General Gongsun Zan, but in his senior officer, Liu Yu, the governor of You Province. If Liu Yu cannot be called benevolent, then no one may be deemed so.

Though he was of the Han imperial lineage, Liu Yu led a simple life and was a diligent public administrator who enforced the law impartially. Under his administration, You Province thrived and was rich, with enough surplus to take in hundreds of thousands of refugees. For this reason, Yuan Shao once wished for Liu Yu to assume the imperial throne, an invitation Liu Yu categorically refused.

Somebody Sue: Yuan Shao was truly cunning. His suggestion was clearly to forward his own interests. He was trying to set up Liu Yu and put him in the wrong!

Zhao Yun: We all knew what sort of tricks Yuan Shao was playing. Liu Yu wished to avoid an open quarrel between them, and his insistence on harmony thus prevented Hebei from being torn apart by a schism. Gongsun Zan, however, vied from the start with Yuan Shao

for control of Ji Province. The thinking of these two men was always at odds! Take the Wuhuan tribes, for example. Liu Yu advocated appeasement and cooperation so as to live and thrive alongside the Wuhuan, whereas Gongsun Zan wanted to acquire more profit and glory by means of punitive expeditions against them.

Such differences in thought became more and more apparent, until Gongsun Zan finally began to ignore Liu Yu's orders. He colluded with the Heishan bandits and turned a blind eye to the soldiers who persecuted the people. Gongsun Zan also seized goods that Liu Yu had apportioned to assist the Wuhuan tribes. Liu Yu's patience ran out, and the two sides at last met on the battlefield.

Somebody Sue: Gongsun Zan was a veteran with years of experience in battlefield campaigns. Good-natured Liu Yu had no hope of matching him.

Zhao Yun: Gongsun Zan dragged Liu Yu to the city center and publicly executed him. He also planted false evidence against Liu Yu, accusing him of conspiring with Yuan Shao to make himself emperor. Liu Yu had spent his life thinking about the people and should not have come to such an end. Had he lived in peaceful times, perhaps he would have met a wholly different fate!

A Fateful Encounter with the Emperor

Somebody Sue: General Zhao, wasn't it at about that time that you got to know Liu Bei?

Zhao Yun: Not long after I joined the ranks of Gongsun Zan's army, the emperor arrived with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, seeking refuge. The emperor and Gongsun Zan were former students of Lu Zhi and good friends.

Gongsun Zan asked the emperor to establish a camp in Qi (today, the city Zibo in Shandong province) and ordered me to accompany him. The emperor and I felt an immediate affinity, and he granted me command of a cavalry troop. After nearly two years of fighting shoulder to shoulder with the emperor, my elder brother died. As a result, I was forced to leave the emperor and return to Changshan to deal with funeral matters. The day I took my leave, the emperor held my hand tightly—

Somebody Sue: Held your hand?

Zhao Yun: Although he said nothing, I could see from his expression that, in his heart, he did not wish us to part ways. How could I not feel the same? I still remember my resolute tone as I said to him, "I will not fail to be worthy of your benevolence!"

Somebody Sue: It's a bit presumptuous to ask this, but I'm truly curious. Is it possible that you and Liu Bei developed feelings that went beyond the friendship of an emperor and his servant?

Zhao Yun: Brother Sue, what are you suggesting? In our time, holding someone's hand signified profound friendship. Do all of you not frequently hold hands?

Somebody Sue: Sorry, sorry, my mistake. After you left Liu Bei, what did you do next?

Zhao Yun: The day of my departure, I thought to myself how difficult it would be for the two of us to meet again. I was unwilling to return to the command of the power-hungry and greedy Gongsun Zan, nor did I wish to work for Yuan Shao. As a result, I stayed eight years in Changshan, and did very little.

Somebody Sue: You did nothing for eight whole years? You were an out-and-out NEET*!

Zhao Yun: What is a NEET?

Somebody Sue: It means you overcame impetuosity, exercised patience, and knew when to yield.

Zhao Yun: I thank you for the compliment, Brother Sue.

* An acronym common in the UK meaning Not in Education, Employment, or Training.