

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

In this episode, I'm going to talk a little bit about the imperial hereditary seal. In the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, this seal initially belonged to the Han emperor, but it disappeared amid the chaos of the purging of the palace eunuchs. Sun Jian later discovered it in the ruins of the former capital Luoyang, and it brought him nothing but trouble and indirectly led to his death. His son Sun Ce then gave the seal to Yuan Shu as collateral to borrow troops to conquer a slice of the empire. With the seal in hand, Yuan Shu dreamed imperial dreams and declared himself emperor, and nothing went right for him after that and he ended up defeated, disgraced, and dead.

But the novel is not the only or first place where the seal is mentioned. There is, in fact, a long history of legends and stories surrounding the seal, and I want to cover some of those in this episode, and as you will see, this thing has kind of been nothing but trouble to its owners.

So the seal was made from a piece of jade that was said to be of uncommon quality. The earliest mention of this jade comes from a text of legalist philosophy titled Han (2) Fei (1) Zi (3), named after the man to whom the principles in the text are attributed. The book was compiled toward the end of the Warring States period, so sometime in the 200s B.C. The book includes a story set in the mid-700s B.C. that goes something like this:

During the Spring and Autumn period, which is the historical era directly preceding the Warring States period, there was a man named Bian (4) He (2) who lived in the kingdom of Chu (3). One day, Bian (4) He (2) was on Mount Jing (1) when he saw a phoenix land on a stone. He became convinced that inside the stone was a precious piece of jade.

Being a loyal subject of Chu, Bian (4) He's (2) first thought was that he should offer this rare treasure to the king. So he brought the stone to the king and told him there's precious jade inside this ordinary-looking rock. The king gave the stone to the palace craftsman who specialized in jade, but the guy took one look at it and said, "This is just a rock."

Well, this king was the cruel, ill-tempered type. When he heard what his craftsman said, he decided that Bian (4) He (2) was trying to play him, so as punishment, he ordered his men to chop off Bian (4) He's (2) left foot and send him on his way.

Years later, the king died, and his brother ascended to the throne. With a new king at the helm, Bian (4) He (2), ever the loyal subject, decided to offer the stone again, still convinced that it contained jade. Again, the new king asked the palace craftsman to take a look, and the craftsman again said, "It's just a rock." Unfortunately for Bian He, the new king was much like the old king when it came to dealing with people who offer him fake gems. He ordered his guards to chop off Bian He's right foot and send him on his way.

This new king reigned for 50 years. When he died, his son ascended to the throne. Bian He, who was still alive, did not try to offer the stone to the new new king this time. Instead, he clutched the stone in his bosom and cried at the foot of Mount Jing (1) for three days and three nights. He cried so hard that his tears ran dry and blood was flowing from his eyes.

When the new new king heard this, he sent someone to ask Bian He what's up. Bian He replied, "I am not crying about having my feet cut off. I am crying because this precious jade has been mistaken for a mere rock, while a loyal man has been deemed a liar."

When the messenger relayed this back to the king, he decided, hey, what the heck, let's cut open this rock and see if there's really jade inside. So they cut the stone open, and sure enough, inside was

a piece of jade of unrivaled beauty. The jade was made into a renowned piece called the He (2) Shi (4) Bi (4), or the He (2) Clan Jade. So after many decades, Bian He was finally vindicated. This story has typically been cited when someone is bemoaning a situation where leaders fail to recognize the skills of talented men.

So that's the first mention of the jade that eventually became the imperial hereditary seal, but it's hardly the last. The next well-known story in the history of this object is set in the year 283 B.C., in the later stages of the Warring States period. At this time, the jade was in the possession of the ruler of a small kingdom called Zhao (4). However, the king of Qin (2), which was one of the big kids on the block, heard that the king of Zhao (4) had this treasure, so he sent an envoy to Zhao (4) and offered to exchange 15 cities for the jade.

This offer presented the king of Zhao with a dilemma. If he refuses the offer, it could offend the king of Qin (2) and possibly even lead to war against a much stronger rival. But if he agrees, there was no guarantee that the king of Qin would pay up once the jade has been delivered, and to merely acquiesce could be interpreted as a sign of weakness, which could tempt the king of Qin to try to conquer the kingdom of Zhao. What to do, what to do?

After much deliberation with his advisers, someone suggested that the king should consult a wise man named Lin (4) Xiang (1) Ru (2), so he did. This is what Lin (4) Xiang (1) Ru (2) told the king:

“Qin is strong; Zhao is weak. Refusal is not an option.”

“But if Qin refuses to give us the cities after they have received the jade, what can we do?” the king asked.

“Qin has offered 15 cities for this piece of jade; it is a fair price,” Lin (4) Xiang (1) Ru (2) replied. “If you refuse, then the fault would lie with you. If you send the jade to Qin and they do not honor the

deal, then the fault would lie with them instead. You should accept the offer and put the onus on Qin."

"In that case, I would like for you to deliver the jade to Qin," the king said. "But what will you do if they do not live up to their promise?"

"If they give us the cities, then I will leave the jade with them," Lin (4) Xiang (1) Ru (2) said. "But if they do not, then I promise to bring the jade back here unscathed."

So the king of Zhao sent Lin (4) Xiang (1) Ru (2) on his way to Qin. When he arrived in the capital of Qin, the king of Qin received him, and Lin Xiang Ru offered up the jade.

The king of Qin examined it and was delighted. He then passed the treasure around to his concubines and his officials so that everyone could have a look, and they were all equally impressed and congratulated their lord on his new acquisition.

While all this was going on, Lin Xiang Ru was standing around, twiddling his thumbs, and waiting for the king of Qin to mention the 15 cities he had offered, but the king never did. It was obvious that the king had no intention of giving up the cities now that he already has the object of his desire in hand.

At this point, Lin Xiang Ru said to the king:

"Even though this piece of jade is extremely valuable, it does have a tiny blemish. It's hard to spot. Allow me to point it out to you, my lord."

Well, the king of Qin fell for this oh-so-obvious trick, and he told his attendants to give the jade to Lin Xiang Ru. As soon as he had the jade in his hands, Lin Xiang Ru took a few steps back and leaned up against one of the columns in the palace. He then glared at the king and said angrily:

"My lord, you sent a messenger to our kingdom and promised to exchange 15 cities for this jade. In good faith, the king of Zhao has sent me here to deliver it. However, you have no intention of

honoring the agreement. Right now, the jade is in my hands. If you try to take it from me, I would rather smash my head and the jade against this column than to relinquish it."

Lin Xiang Ru then held the jade up and looked like he was about to make good on his threat. Not willing to call this bluff, the king of Qin immediately apologized and said, "There's been a misunderstanding. Of course I intend to honor the agreement." He then ordered his officials to bring out a map of his kingdom and pointed out the 15 cities he was going to give up.

But Lin Xiang Ru wasn't about to fall for this again. So he stalled for time.

"Before the jade left the kingdom of Zhao, the king of Zhao fasted for five days and performed a formal parting ceremony," he said to the king of Qin. "My lord, if you are truly sincere about wanting to exchange the cities for the jade, then you should also fast for five days and perform a receiving ceremony. Only then will I present the jade to you."

Well, the king of Qin figured that Lin Xiang Ru wasn't going anywhere, so fine, I'll go through with the formalities. In the meantime, he lodged Lin Xiang Ru in guest quarters.

Won't you know it, when Lin Xiang Ru arrived at the guest house, he immediately ordered a member of his traveling party to disguise himself as a merchant and smuggle the jade back to Zhao.

Five days later, the king of Qin assembled his officials and all the foreign dignitaries who were in the capital, and performed the receiving ceremony. He summoned Lin Xiang Ru, who approached deliberately and bowed.

"I have fasted for five days; you can now present the jade," the king said.

Umm, jade? What jade?

"None of the last 20 or so rulers of Qin have been trustworthy," Lin Xiang Ru said. "I was afraid of being deceived again and losing the jade. So I have already sent it back to Zhao. My lord, you may punish me for my offense."

The king of Qin, who was probably already grumpy on account of his low blood glucose level after five days of fasting, became irate. "Who's the deceiver here? You or me?!" he screamed.

But Lin Xiang Ru remained calm.

"My lord, please calm down and let me finish," he said. "Everyone knows that Qin is strong and Zhao is weak. According to the ways of the world, it has always been the strong bullying the weak, rather than the weak oppressing the strong. If you really want that piece of jade, then please hand over those 15 cities first, and then send an envoy with me back to Zhao. Once Zhao has taken over the cities, we would not dare to withhold the jade."

Seeing how perfectly reasonable all this sounded, the king of Qin really had no excuse to stay mad or punish Lin Xiang Ru in front of all the foreign dignitaries. Besides, even if he executed Lin Xiang ru, it wasn't going to get the jade back. So he swallowed hard and said, "It's just a piece of jade, after all. There is no need to damage the peace between our kingdoms over this."

So in the end, he allowed Lin Xiang Ru to return to Zhao, and he never mentioned wanting to exchange cities for the jade again. In reality, the king of Qin never actually wanted the jade in the first place. He merely issued the offer as a test to see how strong Zhao was and whether it had men who had the talent to solve this dilemma. As Lin Xiang Ru clearly demonstrated to the king of Qin, Zhao indeed had such men, and Zhao was able to get out of this without making an open enemy of the Qin and without appearing weak.

After this episode, the rest of the jade's history unfolded pretty much the way it was told in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. It fell into the hands of Qin (2) Shi (3) Huang (2) Di (4), the first emperor of China, who hailed from the kingdom of Qin and conquered the other kingdoms of the Warring States period. He had his men turn the jade into a seal. He later had to chuck the seal into a lake to calm the waters that were about to capsize his ship. Eight years later, the seal was returned to him, and it remained with the house of Qin until their dynasty fell apart. Eventually, the seal fell into the possession of the house of Han. After being passed around like a hot potato in the chaotic years that we have covered in the first part of the novel, it ended up in the possession of the Han court once again, which by this time actually meant it ended up in the hands of Cao Cao.

From that point on, it supposedly remained with the ruling house of the empire for some 700 years, until it vanished from the historical records in the chaos that followed the end of the Tang dynasty in the 900s A.D.

So there you have it, the probably-not-altogether-true backstory of the more-trouble-than-it's-worth imperial hereditary seal. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I will see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.