



Historical Crisis: Collapse of the Later Han and
the Three Kingdoms

Position Paper Expectations

- a. 1 Page
- b. Times New Roman 12pt font
- c. 1-inch margins (note: Google docs default to 1.25)
- d. Header
 - i. Committee:
 - ii. Delegation:
 - iii. Delegate Name:
 - iv. School:
 - v. Date:
- e. Paragraphs:
 - i. Background of the issue (based on background guide)
 - ii. Character stance (How would your character view this issue?)
 - iii. Proposed solutions (How would your character find a solution to this issue?)

Letter to Delegates

Chair: Iain Halloran (he/him)

Hello Delegates!

My name is Iain Halloran, and I'm excited to bring you all into the three kingdoms crisis committee for TorryMUN. I am a Senior at La Jolla Country Day School, and have been engaging with Model UN since I was in 7th grade. I have participated in dozens of committees over that time, and Model UN has only further fueled my interests in history and global affairs. My favorite experience in MUN so far is probably having the opportunity to represent Simon Bolivar in a committee centered around Latin American revolutions, a historical era which interests me greatly. Besides Model United Nations, I enjoy board games, creative writing, and the study of history.

In my final year of MUN, I hope to provide the best possible experience in this committee for delegates. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out through email or text. 858-262-4453 iain.halloran@ljcds.org

Chair: El Bevash (they/them)

Hello Delegates!

My name is El Bevash, and I'm thrilled to be co-chairing this committee related to an exciting time in Chinese history. I'm a junior at La Jolla Country Day School and have been engaged with Model UN throughout my high school career, attending six conferences so far with many more planned for this year. Iain and I claimed the Best Delegate gavel last spring at JackRabbitMUN as dual delegates and we look forward to leading this committee through a day of productive debate and interesting ideas. Outside of MUN, I'm a visual artist specializing in illustration. I also enjoy travel and learning about history.

I look forward to meeting you and providing a safe, productive space for our discussions. If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch. (858) 344-9936 ebavash2027@ljcds.org

Topic Synopsis:

In 208 BCE, the Han dynasty was founded by Liu Bang, A former sheriff under the Qin dynasty, he was driven to rebel by the harsh policies of the brutal, legalistic Qin dynasty. Leading a band of convicts and dissidence, he forged a new empire. The Han dynasty went on to become one of the longest-lasting dynasties in Chinese history, ruling for centuries and seeing more than a dozen emperors come and go. However, the golden era of Han is over. Ever since a brief usurpation between 9 and 25 AD, which marks the transition between the earlier, Western Han and the Eastern Han,¹ the empire has been in decline. After years of weak and ineffectual rulers, who allowed power to fall into the hands of the court eunuchs and others who hungered for the throne, tensions rose and the cracks in the system of empire grew ever wider.²

Now, in the winter of the year 189, the empire is falling apart. The Yellow Turban rebellion, although somewhat suppressed, is still raging in parts of the country, and steppe nomads stand poised to take advantage of divisions within the empire. To make matters worse, a child emperor sits on the throne, controlled by the Empress He and a eunuch faction known as the Ten Attendants, who are generally unpopular with the public, the military, the nobility, and anybody with a point of view at all. This state of affairs has allowed powerful warlords in the various provinces to become independently militarily powerful, and to govern their own fiefs

¹ "Han Dynasty," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Han-dynasty>.

² Aris Teon, "China's Han Dynasty and the Establishment of Imperial Confucianism," China Journal, June 15, 2023, <https://china-journal.org/2023/06/15/chinas-han-dynasty-and-the-establishment-of-imperial-confucianism/>

without very much input from the central government, which is largely powerless to tell them what they can and cannot do.³

In spite of these historical challenges and problems, which eventually destroyed the dynasty, the Han dynasty was still one of the defining golden eras of Chinese history, and had an enormous influence on every dynasty which followed it. Practices of imperial address, dressing, the system of concubines, the usage of Eunuchs as administrators and servants, tributary relationships with external groups, and more were inherited from this dynasty's manner of governance.⁴

Even with all of its splendor and its imperial power, perhaps the most culturally defining trait of the Han dynasty was still the story of how it fell, as nearly mythological figures such as Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao, and Lu Bu oversaw the splitting of the Han Dynasty first into many warring states, and then into 3 kingdoms which competed for the rulership of the entirety of China, led by competing prospective dynasties. Cao Wei, Shu Han, and the Eastern Wu each spawned from the exploits of the famous figures detailed in this background guide and committee, whose lives have been fictionalized in many adaptations of the famous *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written several hundred years after the fact. This committee focuses on the historical reality, to the extent it can be recovered, over the book's plot, and begins after the defeat of the yellow turban rebellion which devastated the late Han dynasty, and were impossible for the central government to deal with without aid from local armies led by warlords.

Before its final collapse, the Han dynasty was already weakening in power over time, as a series of emperors struggled to deal with the nominally tributary Qiang, Xiongnu, and Xianbei

³ Dennis R.M. Campbell, "The Fall of the Han Dynasty," OER Project, accessed July, 2025, <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/Origins/Unit5/The-Fall-of-the-Han-Dynasty/930L>.

⁴ Yunxin Li, "Elites' Social Networks and Politics in the Han Empire (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)," *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, 9 (2023): <https://openhumanitiesdata.metajnl.com/articles/10.5334/johd.113>.

peoples in the north and west, who often raided and fought with Chinese armies for their own enrichment. Further, the increasing power of eunuch factions within Han China created political division, as did the development of newer religious ideas, particularly certain schools of Daoism, which quickly grew in popularity among peasants, and conflicted with the ruling elite. Additionally, continuous, low-intensity conflict with various steppe tribes destabilized border regions, further fueling warlord power structures in frontier provinces.

In 184, a group known as the Yellow Turbans rebelled against the Han empire, taking issue with the eunuchs'⁵ role in governance especially.⁶ The corruption of this eunuch faction known as the Ten Attendants (in spite of the fact there were twelve of them), who were led by Zhang Rang, had become well-known both to peasant rebels and to the virtuous Confucian officials of China. The yellow turbans themselves were a peasant rebellion born partially out of a Daoist school which preached against the emperor and the nobility. The imperial army of the Han dynasty failed to suppress this rebellion, instead relying on regional generals raising their own armies. These generals rapidly became powerful regional warlords, and ruled their provinces with significant autonomy from the capital city, especially in areas further from the capital. In the end, it would be these men who would divide the united empire, and each of them knew only one could unite the empire, once it had been divided.

This rebellion, which rose after one failed attempt in 184 due to being partially revealed when the planting season was beginning, believed many things, but its key ideological underpinning was a sect of Daoism known as the Taiping Dao (The way of Supreme Peace), which worshipped a deity known as Huang-lao. The Taiping Dao was notable for its tight

⁵ Castrated men who served in all Chinese dynasties in varied roles.

⁶ "The Yellow Turbans," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yellow-Turbans>. Please note that while 黃巾 is translated as Yellow Turban, the actual headwear was just a strip of cloth, not at all as large or complicated as a turban.

organization, with various leaders given titles like generals, and split into 36 'directions' to spread across China. The sect became wildly popular, and served as the basis for the Yellow Turbans' ideological fervor. Although many other taoist sects existed, the Yellow Turbans' movement was especially large and popular. Led by Zhang Jue, they were intent on rebellion against the traditional aristocracy and the Han Dynasty, after years of corrupt rule.

Most of the warlords had been made to work together during the late Han era against the yellow turbans or outside invaders, with figures such as Yuan Shao, Dong Zhuo, and others who would one day become enemies having fought side by side in the past. These experiences created long-lasting divisions between the men, who all knew that the central Han authority was on its way out, and thus were preparing to declare their own independence, and fight for the throne of the emperor of China.

At the start of the committee, the characters are all summoned by Dowager Empress He of Han to the capital, Luoyang, to discuss next steps and to celebrate their victories against the Yellow Turbans which, while still present and powerful in some areas, have seemingly subsided in overall power compared to their previous heights where they had very nearly toppled the great Han Dynasty from within, much as Liu Bang had so many centuries ago. Still, affairs are tense, as various powerful regional generals have emerged as warlords, leading their own provinces with ever-growing independence and ever-growing contempt for the central government in Luoyang, especially with the power of the Ten Attendants, which was broadly unpopular in China.

At this point in time, Dong Zhuo seems to be in the best position to take power, as Liangzhou, the province he commands, is near the capital. This gives him by far the closest base of power to seize control in a military coup. Many other warlords have smaller personal armies

with them, and some have joined together in a temporary alliance against Dong Zhuo. Although the Empress He is nominally in control and Zhang Rang's eunuch faction still possess a significant power, military strength is in the hands of warlords, and without allies, these more legitimate rulers may struggle to maintain their control in the face of armed insurrection.

The imperial family, by this point in time, is in shambles. After the death of emperor Ling in midsummer, empress He became the dowager empress, with her son emperor Shao, 13, taking the throne. However, it didn't last long, and later the same year Dong Zhuo installed an emperor more useful to him. The recently enthroned Emperor Xian is far too young to rule, and is little more than a puppet. Controlled by unpopular imperial factions, his future, and the very future of the Liu family as rulers of China, is in serious danger. After such a long line of puppets and weak rulers, the title of Emperor almost seems like a joke. Restoring imperial rule may be possible, but it would require a great deal of care to ensure that eunuchs, warlords, nomads, or rebels do not exert even more control over the imperial family. Furthermore, the emperor's position in Luoyang means that he is in serious danger of being killed outright if any disruptions occur. To some, such as the eunuchs, and others who still pretend loyalty to Han, he is a useful puppet. To others, he is merely an obstacle to their own rule, the start of their own mighty dynasty.

Nomadic steppe peoples such as the Qiang, Xianbei, and Xiongnu also have a part to play in this conflict. The capital of Luoyang is well within the area they could effectively campaign, and tensions between them and the people of Han are already high, as these groups have been raiding Han territory for years. While claiming power for themselves could be difficult, they still represent a powerful ally for any warlord or faction who could attain them as allies. They also stand in an excellent position to disrupt Dong Zhuo's home province of Liangzhou, which could prove absolutely crucial for any group who wishes to gain power over

him in the coming struggle. First and foremost among the leaders of these Steppe tribes is Tanshihuai, who has previously both given tribute to and led raids against the Han dynasty, and whose current loyalties remain unclear. His power may prove to be the pivotal decider in the allegiance of steppe nomads to one warlord, or to the imperial family itself, to whom they ostensibly owe yearly tribute.

Another faction, the remnants of the Yellow turban rebellion, still led by Zhang Jue, could provide a decisive edge to any warlord who can promise them what they want, as widespread cells of resistance can make it difficult for rivals to bring their forces to the capital, or, conversely, they could make it much easier and quicker for warlords they work alongside.⁷

All of these outsiders and non-warlords only complicate matters for the warlords themselves, who have to be mindful not only over power in the capital, but of the potential threat to their own provinces posed by rivals. After all, if their lieutenants are left in charge of their provinces in their absence, they could very well lose power quickly if another warlord attempts to conquer their lands. Likewise, the absence of a number of warlords and governors away from the interior might provide opportunity for a resurgence of the Yellow Turban Rebellion.

The people themselves are also essential to the successful ruling of a province and of China, and the people, in general, are in dire straits. The empire's precarious state and the warring factions have made life difficult, not to mention the repeated appearance of plague, in 171, 173, 179, 182 and 185.⁸

Economically, the Han Dynasty is in a difficult position, as its main flow of trade across the silk road demands continuous care, to avoid the danger of nomadic tribes like the Xiongnu

⁷ Chi-yun Chen, "WHO WERE THE YELLOW TURBANS? A REVISIONIST VIEW" *Cina*, no. 21 (1988): 62. See also Howard S. Levy, "Yellow Turban Religion and Rebellion at the End of Han." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76, no. 4 (1956): 224.

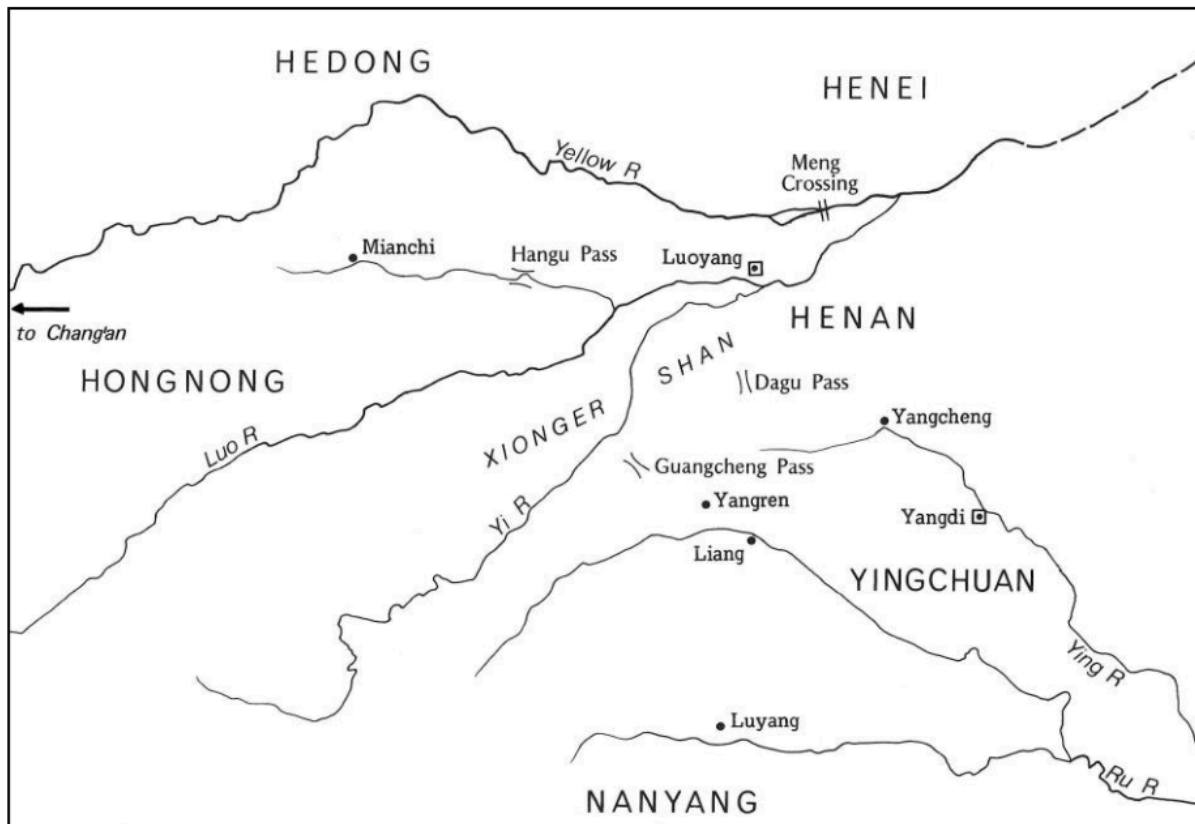
⁸ Rafe de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han Dynasty 23-220 AD* (Brill Academic Publishing, 2016).

and Xianbei raiding caravans and cutting the Han off from their lucrative trade partners in the Mediterranean region and middle east.⁹ Additionally, the largely agricultural domestic economy of the Han dynasty is threatened by continuous factionalism and war, as peasants who should be working in the fields are fighting and dying in wars, reducing the overall availability of food for the people, unless the cycles of planting and harvest can be maintained. Likewise, major cities such as Luoyang are dependent on imported food, making the potential of a siege a serious threat, as a large population may quickly open the city gates if food supplies disappear.

The different regions of China face largely differing problems, as while the northwestern capital regions suffer from the potential threat of nomadic invasions from Xianbei or Xiongnu, the southern regions face potential famines with years of instability, and the ever-present possibility that the Yangtze river could flood, causing only more devastation.¹⁰ The north's position is perhaps the most precarious, as though the proximity to the capital has traditionally meant stability, recent political developments and the ever-present potential for nomadic invaders leaves danger floating. Additionally, if a civil war were to break out, it would play out especially fiercely in the capital, as warlords attempt to control important keys such as the imperial seal or the emperor's person.

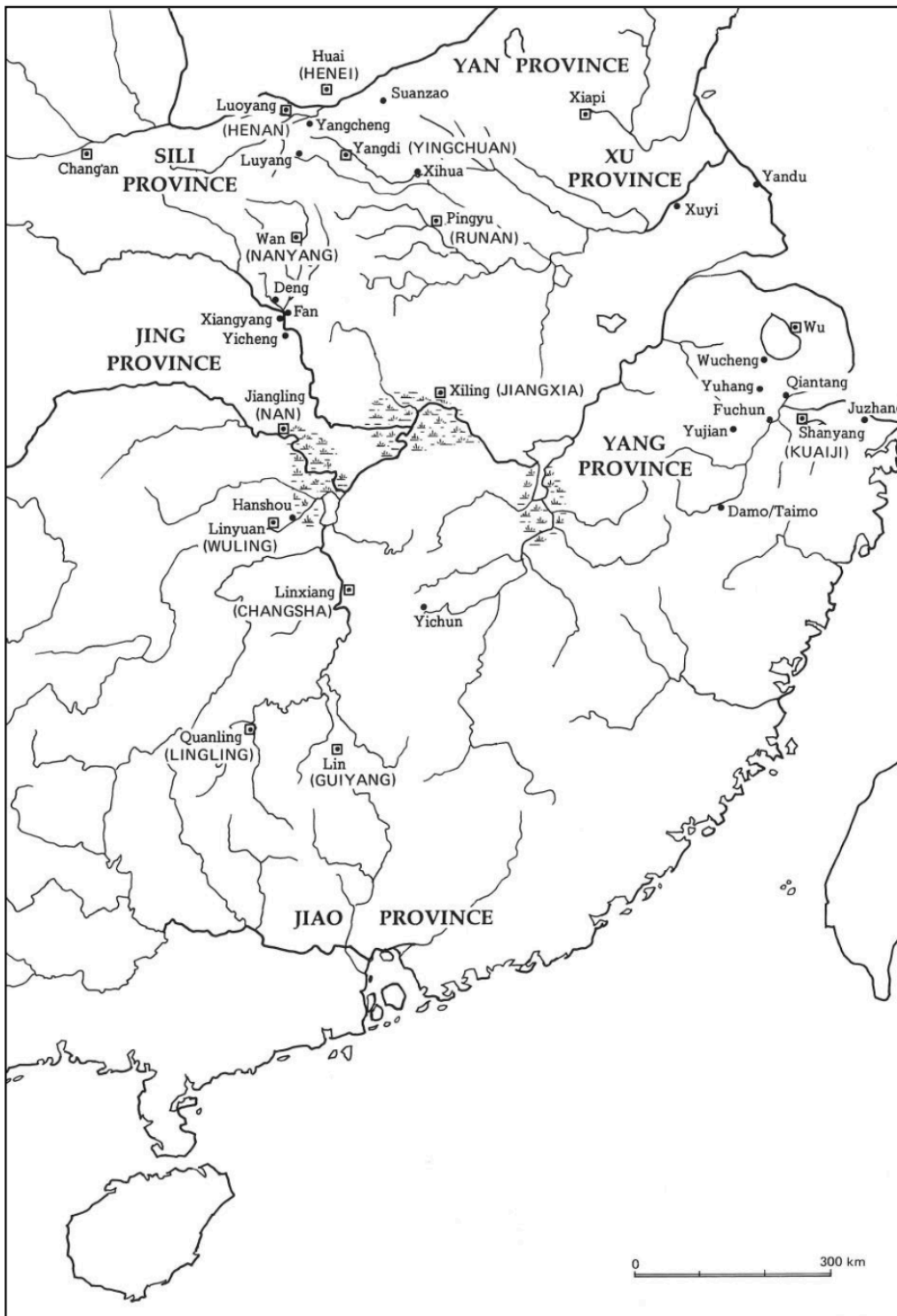
⁹Xinru Liu, *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, vol. 1, eds. Debin Ma and Richard von Glah, (Cambridge University Press, 2022), chapter 6 *passim*.

¹⁰ Bao Maohong, "Environmental History in China," *Environment and History* 10, no. 4 (2004): 480-481. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723506>.



(add picture caption)

The South, meanwhile, has a more secure position against foreign invaders, but faces the lion's share of remaining yellow turban resistance, and many of the regional warlords may fight each other, which endangers crop failures which would compound existing problems with disease and food insecurity. Thus, overall, the South faces fewer immediate threats than the North, but a civil war propagating through these lands would likely cause an enormous human cost.



All in all, the provincial warlords throughout China stand balanced on spear tips, with the chance to gain everything under heaven, or lose all of their power, and their life, in one swipe of a sword or one falling arrow. The provinces stand divided, in a tense standoff where each warlord knows that the others are not fully trustworthy, but also knows surviving without allies would be impossible. As Mark Edward Lewis argued in his analysis of flood myths in early Chinese culture, organization at the level of the state, the dynasty, the family and even individuals must be the outcome of all chaotic moments in human events. From chaos comes order. Our task is to find the path to that order.¹¹

With the situation laid out, although the future is unclear for China, one thing is abundantly obvious to anyone observing: the center cannot hold, change must come to the empire, if it is to survive. What parts of the empire will survive the transition, and who will lead the nation forward?

Questions to consider:

1. How can regional warlords and commanders take advantage of the weak later Han dynasty?
2. What technologies played a role in the events of this period? Could they have been used differently?
3. How can foreign actors best exploit the situation in China?
4. Can the Han dynasty survive this upheaval?
5. If not, who could possibly come to replace the Han?

¹¹ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China* (State University of New York Press, 2006).

Character List

Tanshihuai:

As the pre-eminent leader of the Xianbei horse nomads, Tanshihuai stands poised in the northwest of China to exploit the instability of his tributary master's dynasty, and could tip the scales of power in favor of whichever warlord he chose to support. Commanding a force of hardened nomad horse archers, Tanshihuai has a relatively small army in numbers and resources, but a high-quality force, and one that would not likely betray him.

Sun Jian

Famous for his bravery, including an incident where he climbed a rebel city's walls leading from the front, Sun Jian is among the most influential men in China, and is poised with a relatively small but highly loyal army, experienced from battles against Qiang rebels in the west. He has previously worked alongside Dong Zhuo, though he was not impressed by him, and stands as one of the obstacles to any attempt for Dong Zhuo or his allies to seize power.

Yuan Shao

One of the major warlords within China who put down the Yellow turban rebellion, Yuan Shao has a sizable army under his control, but most of his forces are far from the capital, and the troops and advisors with him do not yet fully trust him. Still, Yuan Shao is a significant player for the power that is sure to be left as the Han dynasty begins to collapse.

Dong Zhuo

Perhaps the pre-eminent warlord within China at this time, Dong Zhuo stands poised near Chang'an with a massive army, as his own home province is very near the city. With this force at his disposal, and with experienced men within the army, none could stand alone against Dong Zhuo's raw military power. In spite of this, he has very few allies among the warlords, as his uncouth behaviour won him few friends during the late Han era. The largest warlord must tread with light feet if he is to claim China.

Zhang Rang

The leader of a Eunuch faction known as the Ten Attendants, Zhang Rang was an infamously corrupt man, and controlled much of the imperial administration through his strategic alliance with the Empress Dowager, who had favored him throughout most of his career. However, Zhang Rang is hated by almost all of the warlords and by the people, and his position is extremely fragile in the capital, especially seeing as he has no direct personal army.

Cao Cao

Clever and crafty, Cao Cao rose to prominence and displayed his wits during the early years of the Yellow Turban Rebellion. After a brief retirement, he was appointed Colonel of the Western Garden by Emperor Ling. However, after Emperor Ling's death and Dong Zhuo's rise to power, Cao Cao fled the Capital to Chenliu. Now, he has collected a force of around 5,000 men and joined the allied army against Dong Zhuo. With China thrown into chaos, this wily warlord has the chance to claim great power.

Zhuge Liang

A noted inventor and Tactician, Zhuge liang is a minor commander allied to Liu Bei, and commands a small force well-equipped soldiers, including a proportionally large number of highly capable archers equipped with Zhuge Liang's personally created repeating crossbows, known commonly as Chu Ko Nu.

Zhang Jue

As leader of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, Zhang Jue has the faith of many discontented with the empire and those who rule it. Though many thought he died, he has instead spent the last few years in hiding, growing his following, and now stands prepared to challenge the empire once more. His forces are gathered in the northeast, and while not well equipped or very numerous, they are highly motivated and fanatically loyal.

Liu Bei

Among the pre-eminent warlords in China today, Liu Bei was born a peasant in spite of his descendance from an early Han emperor. He is a leader of one of the major warlord factions, and has several allies. His personal forces in the capital region are relatively small, and his base of power is in the region of modern-day hebei to the northeast. Liu Bei's closest allies are his sworn brothers Guan yu and Zhang fei, as well as the inventor Zhuge Liang.

Guan Yu

A powerful warlord, incredible personal combatant, and sworn brother of Liu Bei, Guan yu is another powerful warlord, with his base of power in his home province of Shanxi offering a relatively short march for his local army to assist in the capital region. His forces are well equipped and fairly loyal, but have a relatively small amount of cavalry.

Zhang Fei

Zhang Fei, Liu Bei's other sworn brother, is a skilled commander of cavalry, commanding a small force of heavy cavalry who are highly personally loyal to him. Much like Guan Yu, Zhang Fei is a personally skilled combatant, and is described as a tiger even among the warlords of the late Han era.

Lu Bu

A legendary warrior and erstwhile ally of Dong Zhuo, Lu Bu commands an elite, loyal force of infantry, skilled in storming defensive locations and capturing cities and fortresses. In spite of this ability, he suffers from a lack of a large army or a particularly well-developed base of power as a warlord in his own right.

Liu Biao

With a power base in modern day hubei and hunan, Liu Biao is one of Dong Zhuo's few allies among the warlords, and commands a formidable force in the capital region. His large home province, consequently, is less well-defended than some others, but its greater stability helps mitigate this.

Gogukcheon

The king of the kingdom of Goguryeo in northern Korea, Gogukcheon stands in a position to threaten chinese northern provinces, or very effectively guard the flank of a warlord whose power base is located in the north of the country. He has no immediate presence in the capital, but his base of power is within striking distance of many important northern bastions.

Shi Xie

Although nominally loyal to the Han Dynasty like most of Vietnam, Shi Xie's power base in the region is significant, and he leads Vietnam as governor and warlord, in spite of not being a local resident. He has among the smallest groups of soldiers in the capital region, but he can call on several powerful and unique tools from his base of power, including a small force of trained war elephants.

Zheng Er

This speculative character is a leader of a powerful coalition of pirates and maritime mercenaries, currently basing her operations out of the Pearl river delta, and raiding the lucrative trade in tea and other commodities along the maritime silk road. She has no direct presence in the capital region, but she can threaten any coastal or river-lying area with naval blockade, commanding by far and away the most effective naval force in the region.

Tullius Sinicus

This speculative character is a roman merchant with close commercial ties to Dong Zhuo, and a distant tie to the Roman Empire at the opposite terminus of the Silk Road. He has only a few guards with him, but his immense personal wealth and influence in trade could bring the funds to conquer China for any warlord who can gain his allegiance.

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