

FanGong Seawall

Jiwen

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FanGong Seawall is a lucid hagiographical novel in which a revered leader's sense of civic duty and personal integrity leads to community improvements.

Jiwen's informative biographical novel *FanGong Seawall* is about a public official whose dedication to local welfare led to the construction of needed infrastructure.

In 1021 in coastal Yancheng, Fan Zhongyan manages a government-controlled salt warehouse. When a tsunami strikes, he is compelled to help the workers, who are unable to meet their seasonal quotas.

The novel trades between factual descriptions, as of salt's economic value, the use of salterns, and brining and related processes, and Zhongyan's family background and daily activities. Its earliest chapters are dedicated to fleshing out the industry itself, as well as the culture around it, in which people are dependent on the sea and vulnerable to pressure from the government. They deal with hardships like profiteering lenders and shopkeepers, as well as penalties when their productivity falls. Few have adequate livelihoods; some turn to criminal activities. Against this background, Zhongyan's courage stands out; he searches for a practical solution to the people's issues, having frank discussions with others about their needs and exposing corruption.

Following the tsunami, Zhongyan's plan to build a new seawall meets with opposition. He wants to protect the land, as well as to improve the workers' ability to meet their industry's demands, but he's impeded by bureaucrats who value self-promotion and luxuries most. The book's characterizations rest on sharp contrasts—between Zhongyan, who believes that officials should serve others, and those he stands against.

In this biographical novel, the subtleties of era politics are drawn upon to emphasize how Zhongyan's reputation as a fair-minded person developed. His pushes for reform and assistance to others suggest heroic conscientiousness, and his lifestyle is depicted as a model of modesty. His awareness that salt sales fill the military's coffers complicates his struggles, but he navigates his moral quandaries in a consistent manner. Still, a sense of his humanity is preserved: though people express astonishment at the altruism of his thinking, his everyday frustrations keep him from being perfect.

Secondary characters, including servants and Zhongyan's colleagues, fill the bustling background and are seldom developed beyond their roles. They, too, are used to emphasize Zhongyan's steadfastness—and to show how people are impacted by trickle-down decisions. And the period itself is evoked through colorful details about foods, hierarchical relationships, and household conditions, as well as through social events like a wedding. Though the narrative's progression toward the project's completion is slow and impeded by diversions to Zhongyan's family issues, it makes for a satisfying ending.

FanGong Seawall is a lucid historical novel in which a revered leader's sense of civic duty and personal integrity leads to community improvements.

KAREN RIGBY (February 8, 2022)

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