

their unflinching, however conflicted, commitment and dedication to the struggle that transform revolutionary movements to consider issues of gender and sexuality as seriously as military goals and political ideology.

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#### Notes

1 *The Huk rebellion* (1942-1956) was a result of two separate, peasant-based struggles in the Philippines, first against the Japanese and then against the new Philippine Republic. The Viet Minh was a national liberation movement that sought independence from the French and fought for the unification of Vietnam after World War Two.

2 Major works on the *Huk rebellion*, including Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion* (2002), Lachica, *Huk: Philippine Agrarian Society in Revolt* (1971), Saulo, *Communism in the Philippines* (1990), and Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism* (1955), as well as memoirs by Pomeroy, *The Forest* (1963); Taruc, *Born of the People* (1953) and *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1967) and Lava, *Memoirs of a Communist* (2003) ignored issues of gender and sexuality in the Huk movement, and particularly women.

3 For an in-depth treatment of the "Huk Amazon", see my book entitled, *Huk Amazons: Gender, Sex and Revolution in the Philippines* (forthcoming March 2009).

4 See Lanzona 2009 and Jeff Goodwin "The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affective Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946-1954," *American Sociological Review* 62 (February 1997)

5 Secretariat, PKP, "Revolutionary Solution of the Sex Problem," *Politburo Exhibit no. 1-15*, September 12, 1950.

6 These problems are discussed in two documents, *Politburo Exhibit O 757*, "Finance Opportunism: Its Basic Causes and Remedies," by SEC [Secretariat]. October 10, 1950. Secretariat, Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), *Politburo Exhibit no. N-1022-1026*, "The Struggle against Awaitingism," no date.

7 See Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War* (1999), Tétreault, ed. *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World* (1994) and Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memoirs of War from North Vietnam* (1998).

8 See Quinn-Judge, "Women in the Early Vietnamese Communist Movement: Sex, Lies and Liberation," *South East Asia Research* Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2001): 245-269. See also Turley, "Women in the Communist Revolution in Vietnam", *Asian Survey*, Vol 12, No. 9 (Sept 1972): 793-805.

9 See Turner 1998 and Nguyen Thi Dinh's moving memoir, *No Other Road to Take* (1976). In her wartime diary, Dang Thuy Tram (1943-1970) describes how she constantly repressed her romantic love for fellow comrades because of her fear of being reprimanded and her belief that those feelings had no place in the revolution. See *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram* (2007).

Accounts of Southeast Asian women directly engaged as military combatants are rare. While female warriors appear in the iconography of various Southeast Asian religions and folklore, and there are numerous descriptions of the non-combat roles women played in military campaigns, the history of women fighters in Southeast Asia remains largely unwritten. Geoff Wade's portrait of the enigmatic Lady Sinn (Xian fu-ren), goes some way to redress the balance.

# Lady Sinn:

## a 6th century woman warrior

GEOFF WADE

Lady Sinn [Xian fu-ren (洗夫人)] was a prominent Nan Yue woman known to us only by this moniker which Chinese historians assigned her. The name by which she was known within her own society will likely never be known, and all that we know of her derives from the Chinese standard histories *Sui shu* (隋書) and *Bei shi* (北史). We read first that Lady Sinn was from the most prominent of the Nan Yue clans, one which had "for generations been leaders of the Nan Yue", and which exercised control over 100,000 families in a region which is today southern Guangdong. Given that the Chinese commanderies in the region controlled only about 5,000 households, the extent to which Chinese culture was still very much a minority culture in this part of the Lingnan region is obvious.

The Nan Yue, also termed Bai Yue or Southern Yue, were the inhabitants of areas south of the Yangzi prior to Chinese expansion into these regions. Certainly they were ethnically and linguistically diverse, but textual evidence suggests that Lady Sinn would have been a speaker of some proto-Tai language, likely a precursor of Zhuang. The *Sui shu* describes these Southeast Asian peoples, to which the Southern Yue would have belonged, as having "deep-set eyes, high noses, and black curls" and the custom of cutting their hair and decorating their bodies. They also went barefoot, used a length of cloth to tie around the body, and in the winter wore robes. The women wore their hair in a pestle shape, and they sat on mats made from coconut palm. It was also noted that they produced the bronze drums so famed as 'Dong Son drums', a clear feature of Southeast Asian rather than Chinese culture.

### An advantageous alliance

Unlike the short-lived Trung sisters, who had led the Vietnamese against the Chinese five centuries before her, Lady Sinn lived to a ripe old age, from c. 512 to 602 CE. In the mid-530s, a marriage took place between Lady Sinn and Feng Bao (馮寶), a descendant of the Northern Yan Chinese rulers who had fled to the south. As governor of the region, he was charged with achieving and maintaining some order on behalf of the Liang state. This allowed the Feng family, who had been unsuccessfully trying to implement Chinese rule in Lingnan, to use this new marriage alliance to institute Chinese laws and regulations among the huge number of Nan Yue people controlled by the Sinn family. From this time on, Lady Sinn became a part of the administration of the region by the Feng family.

Lady Sinn's military exploits in this role form the majority of the Chinese accounts of her life. In the 550s, aged about 40, she led military forces who attacked and captured the administrative seat where those who had rebelled against the Liang court had ensconced themselves. The death of her husband coincided with the emergence of the new Chen dynasty centred at what is today Nanjing, and Lady Sinn sent her 9 year-old son - as the head of the Nan Yue chieftains - to the Chen capital to seek some recognition. As a result, the family was assigned a title of Defenders of the Yangchun Commandery. The Sui history informs us that the Lady was involved in "cherishing" the Nan Yue, suggesting that she remained a powerful figure in the non-Chinese Lingnan firmament.

A further rebellion against Chen rule by the regional inspector of Guangzhou occurred in 570 CE and again it was Lady Sinn, now in her late fifties, who led her forces against the rebels, defeating them. This resulted in her



Modern South Chinese representation of Lady Sinn (c.512-602)

being further rewarded and enfeoffed by the Chen court, suggesting recognition of her importance in maintaining Chinese control of the Southeast Asian peoples south of the ranges. The demise of the Chen dynasty in the 580s gave rise to further disruption of the lives of people in the Lingnan region. The account informs us that the tribal peoples of Lingnan urged the Lady to lead them with the title of 'Sacred Mother'. She is then credited by the Chinese historians with assisting the incoming Sui dynasty general Wei Guang in reaching Guangzhou. Further honours were heaped upon Lady Sinn and her family members by the new Sui court.

Yet again in 590 CE, Lady Sinn sent forces to destroy another non-Chinese leader who had risen against the Sui. Although now in her late seventies, the chroniclers nevertheless advise that she still donned armour to escort the Sui envoy around the various administrations in Lingnan on horseback. The last major event in which we read of the Lady's involvement was the impeaching of a corrupt Commander-in-Chief in Panzhou (Guangzhou) in 601 CE. His depredations had reportedly led to many of the tribal people of Lingnan fleeing. The almost 90 year-old Lady was imperially commissioned to pacify the region, and by travelling to 10 administrative centres, we are informed, each was quelled by her arrival with the Imperial letter. For this, she and her deceased son Pu were rewarded. She was personally assigned 1500 households in what was likely the island of Hainan. The Lady died in a year equivalent to 602 CE.

It is quite apparent from the *Sui shu* account that Lady Sinn's husband Feng Bao was from a northern court and was Chinese, and that the Feng family used this marriage to Lady Sinn to exercise greater control over the non-Chinese people of the region. Prior to the marriage, the *Sui shu* tells us, "as they were people from another place", the Feng family's "orders were not implemented". The marriage with the dominant family among the Nan Yue was obviously a calculated policy move.

The marriage also seems to have played a certain role in bringing the Sinn family more into the Chinese world, through the children and grandchildren who could span both Chinese and Yue societies.<sup>2</sup> A grandson of Lady Sinn, Feng Ang, became a major general under the Tang dynasty, and was instrumental in helping the Tang establish and

subsequently exercise suzerainty over Lingnan. But it was obviously Lady Sinn who played a crucial role during the 6th century in subordinating the Southeast Asian societies of Lingnan to successive Chinese states.

Through her marriage to Feng Bao, Lady Sinn increasingly assumed a power that likely none of her Yue predecessors had possessed. By marrying a Chinese, and jointly participating in the magisterial functions which her husband had to perform in his official capacity, she became a functionary linking the bureaucracy of several successive Chinese states and her own tribal people. But it was her military planning and activities which were to earn her greater accolades from the Liang, Chen and Sui polities. While it was initially the Feng family which was recognised as defenders by the Liang, it gradually became apparent to the Chinese rulers that real power among the Nan Yue lay with Lady Sinn.

### Administrative 'assistance'

However, this was not to be without cost to Lady Sinn's independence. A Private Secretariat was established to assist the Lady in her new administrative duties and provide her with a range of Chinese advisers. It also provided the Sui court with a further avenue for influencing and monitoring her activities. Such administrative arrangements were in fact repeated throughout Chinese expansionist history as a transitional structure by which the traditional non-Chinese rulers of newly-conquered or incorporated regions were first recognised by the Chinese state, and then guided in its ways.

During her lifetime, Lady Sinn was apparently held in high esteem by her own society as well as being respected by the Chinese people who moved into Lingnan. By the 10th century, she had been deified. Temples dedicated to Lady Sinn are today fairly numerous in the southern part of Guangdong and in Hainan Island. While a number of historical figures - Ma Yuan, Guan Di, Lin Mo/Ma-zu - have been deified in Chinese culture, there are few examples of non-Chinese persons who were so venerated (except perhaps Gautama Buddha). Was the Lady worshipped because of the role she played in assisting the Chinese states to expand to the south, or was the respect accorded to her by the Southeast Asian society she belonged to continued through the period of Sinitisation? Regardless of how we explain her deification, there can be no doubt that Lady Sinn was a major figure in both Southeast Asian and Chinese history and that she is deserving of a position among the ranks of major Southeast Asian women warriors.

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#### Notes

- 1 "Xian fu-ren" (洗夫人). I am here opting for the modern Cantonese pronunciation of the graph.
- 2 Much as is the case today among the people known as the "Chinese Shan" who reside in northern Burma and Yunnan.