

The story of Hua Mulan – a woman successfully masquerading as a man within the imperial military for over a decade – has entranced and intrigued generations of Chinese. Since the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534), when the original poem *The Ballad of Mulan (Mulan shi)*<sup>1</sup> first appeared, Hua Mulan's remarkable adventures have been a recurring theme in both elite and popular cultural forms. Louise Edwards examines the various renditions of Hua Mulan's story and discovers that China's most famous woman warrior was redolent with sexual significance.

# Re-fashioning the warrior

## Hua Mulan:

### *Changing norms of sexuality in China*

LOUISE EDWARDS

The continued popularity of Hua Mulan's tale derives in part from its flexibility and its redactors' enthusiasm to make adjustments to the description, plot and conclusion as suits their needs. As Wu Pei-Yi aptly put it, "She was, and still is, amenable to all forms of fantasizing and manipulation".<sup>2</sup> There is not one single coherent Hua Mulan narrative, but many. However, the sustained popular interest in the story over 1500 years (Mulan has been the subject of poetry, drama, opera and more recently film, television series and video games) also emerges in large part from its foregrounding of a foundational problem in China's ever evolving social order: the governance of sexual morality between and among men and women.<sup>3</sup>

In dressing as a man and undertaking masculine life-roles, Hua Mulan challenges long-held expected differentiation between the behaviour of men and women. Her departure from the feminine domestic realm to enter the masculine world of warfare is at the core of her ongoing appeal.

This aspect of her appeal expanded as practices of sex-segregation and the sexualisation of female virtue increased through the Ming (1368-1644) and especially the Qing (1644-1912) dynasties. In the 20th century, reformist intellectuals' and creative artists' embracing of feminist principles as an emblem of modernity meant Mulan's venture into the male world was invoked as evidence of an early Chinese woman's challenge to sex-segregation. However, while invalidating sex-segregation they were still unable to entirely un-couple female virtue and sexual chastity.

#### Taboos on body bits

The sexualisation of the Mulan body has evolved over time as the different 'female body bits' move in and out of erotic focus. In the Tang, eyebrows set upon a delicate face featured as signifiers of Mulan's feminine desirability and cosmetics served as synecdoches for the intimacy of the private, feminine boudoir in poems on Mulan by Bai Juyi (772-846) and Du Mu (803-852). In the Ming, Xu Wei's (1521-93) popular Ming drama *The female Mulan replaces her father in the military (Ci Mulan ti fu cong*

*jun*) reminds readers of her erotic appeal through extensive references to Mulan's feet - a highly eroticised part of the female body at this time. Xu's play describes Mulan painfully unbinding her feet in order to pass as a man. Mulan's mother also draws the audiences' attention to feet by commenting that she finds her daughter's feet "big" and "strange". The original *Ballad of Mulan* made no reference to foot-binding because the practice did not exist in the Northern Wei, but its anachronistic inclusion in the Ming versions of her story was important because the foot motif reminded the audience of the sexualised and eroticised nature of women's bodies.

Mulan's 20th century re-creators used other parts of the body to remind audiences of her sexuality. They build tension around comic references to the upper body and breasts. In the 1964 Huangmei diao opera-film version of her story, directed by Yue Feng, Mulan resists receiving medical attention for her shoulder wound using feeble arguments like "Since I was small I haven't liked to remove my clothes". The other soldiers comment that it is strange

that a "Big tough guy doesn't like taking his clothes off". In the end, a compromise is reached and they cut an opening in the clothing around the wound without exposing the rest of her body. Wong Hoking's 1961 Cantonese Opera film version includes a similar upper arm injury, which is treated only by carefully rolling up the sleeve, but the soldiers that work on the injury rather salaciously discuss the unusual smoothness of his/her skin. In the 1999 Yang Peipei directed multi-episode television drama version, Mulan's breasts are a constant source of difficulty for her disguise as she avoids her fellow soldiers touching her chest in multiple comic scenes of celebratory group hugs and upper body injuries.

Accompanying the shifting, disaggregated, corporeal erotic is the evident anxiety produced by the dismantling of sex-segregation practices in the 20th century. Mulan allows audiences to touch upon the central problems of feminine sexuality and female sexual virtue; particularly the latter's vulnerability to the dangers posed by a woman's proximity to men. The most remarkable example of the anxiety produced by the risk to norms of virtue posed by 'women in public' emerges from the 1939 version directed by Bu Wancang. The film was released in the middle of the War of Resistance against Japan where 'the ravaged woman' routinely symbolised the ravaged nation in film, fiction and art. It commences with Mulan being surrounded by hoodlums attempting to steal the rabbits she has just caught. The sexual threat posed by the gang is clear as the leader touches her with his arrows, moving from her lips, face, arm and eventually thwacking her buttocks. The movement around her body suggesting that no part of her body was safe and every part was an eroticised site. Moreover, this sexualised body is a vulnerable body. Others in the group warn her to behave because he "still hasn't taken a wife" suggesting that he might like to 'take' Mulan. To escape this threatening gang Mulan uses her wit and cunning. Later in the film, audiences are reminded of the threat posed by soldiers to women when the invading forces capture the command post and rush through carrying off the screaming and terrified women as booty.

The eroticisation of privacy marks the maintenance of the female body as rich in sexuality. Tang dynasty (618-907) readers view Mulan's boudoir and imagine her painstaking care in applying cosmetics

and painting her eyebrows in poems by Bai Juyi and Du Mu. The invocation of Mulan amidst her personal toilette provided male readers of refined Tang poetry a glimpse into the female boudoir. The Ming-Qing eroticisation of the secret viewing of women urinating, discussed at length by R. Keith McMahon, makes an appearance in the Xu Wei version of the Mulan story.<sup>4</sup> He entertains his Ming audiences with a humorous discussion of Mulan's toileting problems. One of Mulan's comrades comments, "It's very strange that Brother Hua never lets anyone see him urinate". The play devotes much space to explain Mulan's ability to avoid being seen urinating. In the late 20th century, when the evacuation of bodily waste is regarded as prurient and scatological, rather than erotic and amusing, such matters are ignored. Instead, in keeping with the traditions of eroticisation of spying on 'bathing beauties', we see repeatedly Mulan's difficulties in bathing. This is a frequent feature of Yang Peipei's 1999 television series. For example, Mulan explains to her much-amused father how she avoids being caught naked - including swimming at night in icy cold rivers and the audience is treated to comic episodes where she is nearly discovered naked in baths and bathrooms, avoiding detection only by fortuitous twists in plot.

The mobility of 'the erotic' around the body and the changing notion of the private as feminised and sexualised over the course of time reveal the importance of sexuality to the ongoing appeal of the Mulan story. She is far from the "non-sexual", "defeminized" women warrior that Cai Rong argues dominates the *Wuxia* (Martial Arts) literary and film genres of recent years.<sup>5</sup> She is a filial daughter, but within that pious rubric she has also allowed generations of readers and viewers to fantasise on the problems of human sexuality and female sexual virtue.

#### Cross-dressing and homo/hetero-sexual desire

Unlike Hua Mulan's soldier comrades in arms, readers of the original 'Ballad' and the subsequent audiences of dramatic and television renditions are drawn into a conspiracy of cross-dressing. Prior to the 20th century, the narrative tension this special knowledge generates revolves around the risk Mulan takes in attracting official displeasure, execution, shame or abuse during her masquerade as a man. However, in the 20th century, in keeping with the expanding disapproval of homoerotic



'Mulan bidding her parents farewell'. From Chu Renhu (fl. 1675-1695). *Sui Tang yangyi*. (Narrative of the Sui and the Tang). Full text version available from Project Gutenberg. [www.gutenberg.org/files/23835/23835-o.txt](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23835/23835-o.txt)



The beautiful and filial Mulan'. From Ma Tai (1886-1939). *Meiren baitai huapu*. (Pictorial collection of myriad beauties), in Ma Tai. rpt. 1982. *Ma Tai hua bao* (Treasury of Ma Tai's pictures). Shanghai: Guji shudian



In 1998 Walt Disney Pictures released the animated feature film *Mulan* based on the legend of Hua Mulan.

desire, Mulan's cross-dressing provides scope for shoring up the normativity of heteroerotic desire. Through numerous scenes of 'misguided' desire, audiences are drawn, through myriad hetero-normative jokes, into complicity with the inappropriateness of homosexuality. Her external masculinity is repeatedly described as causing conflicting and confusing desires among her close male comrades as they are curiously aroused by

her underlying femininity. In Yang Peipei's 1999 television series Mulan's commanding officer, General Li, cannot understand why he feels such a depth of emotion for a fellow soldier. He seeks confirmation for his 'strange homoerotic' urges from his peers hoping that they feel similar emotions towards each other - perhaps these emotions are merely a masculine camaraderie developed by joint military service? The soldiers make repeated jokes about

the 'homosexual' feelings Li has for Hua and the audience is entertained throughout because they alone 'know' that Li's feelings are really 'normal'. Viewers know that his anxiety about his homosexual urges is unfounded.

The 1961 Cantonese Opera film also includes multiple jokes about the mysterious affinity that is developing between Mulan and one of her fellow soldiers. This version includes a scene where other soldiers voyeuristically spy upon Mulan's 'strange romance'. They make salacious side comments to the Opera's audience who know their homosexual interpretations of the scene are not really as they appear. The 1964 Yue Fong version includes jokes about presumed homosexual interest in the scene describing the imminent separation of General Hua Mulan and her close comrade, General Li. They express their love for each other with Li quickly rationalising it as 'brotherly love'.

The instruction to the audience about the 'inappropriateness' of homosexual desire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also apparent in the 1939 Bu Wancong film. It includes a scene where two soldiers spot the young, 'handsome', new recruit, Mulan. They attempt to bully Mulan with threatening comments

of homosexual intent - of course Mulan repels them with her superior wit and strength. Within these saucy homoerotic themes audiences are comforted in the superior knowledge that homosexual acts cannot occur with Mulan, but made anxious by the fact that the desire her underlying essential femininity provokes among men may result in her undoing.

The Hua Mulan story cycle has been routinely promoted for its advocacy of the key Confucian virtue of filial piety. Yet, as the story evolved over the centuries its power to provoke thought on norms of sexual morality appears to have become central to its popular appeal. Her virtue in filial relations provides the frame within which more problematic social relations can be explored. In part, the expansion in sexualised content, relative to filial content, can be accounted for by the power of the taboo on 'sexuality' and 'the private' to provoke comic and/or sensational interest in a world of increasingly commercialised artistic practice. Sex sold seats in Ming theatres and Republican cinemas and continues to do so today.

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#### Notes

- 1 For an English translation of the poem see Frankel, H. 1976. *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 2 Wu, Pei-yi. 2002. "Yang Miaozen: A Woman Warrior in Thirteenth Century China," *Nan nü*, vol. 4, no. 2.
- 3 The full paper is a chapter in a book I am currently writing titled *Women Warriors of China*.
- 4 McMahan, Keith R. 1988. *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- 5 Rong, Cai. 2005. "Gender Imaginations in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the *Wuxia* World," *Positions*, vol. 13, no. 2.

Once the revolution or war of independence is over, the struggle for a better society continues. The reintegration of guerillas into society and the construction of professional defence and police institutions poses considerable challenges to post-conflict societies. From the 1990s onwards, it has been increasingly recognised that gender also needs to be included as a variable in order to allow for a smooth and fair transition to a post-conflict society.<sup>1</sup>

# Whispered confidences:

*articulating the female in the PNTL (police) and the F-FDTL (military) in Timor Leste*

JACQUELINE SIAPNO

"The military does not recognize between female or male. The physical obstacles are very heavy, but once you enter the armed forces, there is no such thing as female or male. In our opinion, this is not discrimination." (Interview with female F-FDTL, *Metinaro*, March 2008.)

It is probably no exaggeration to claim that the 34-year East Timorese war of independence against the Indonesian military would not have succeeded without active female participation. Apart from more traditional support roles, women actively participated as combatants. This was greatly facilitated by the ideology of the Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor Leste) – the military arm of the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) – that all combatants were equal, regardless of gender. As the above quote demonstrates, the women, and presumably also the men, strongly believed in this.

A recently concluded research project in the Democratic Republic of East Timor, entitled "Women in the F-FDTL and PNTL" was undertaken for the country's "State of the Nation Report".<sup>2</sup> Research included interviews with female (and male) personnel of the F-FDTL (Timor Leste Defence Forces) and the PNTL (Timor Leste National Police). The research project provided interesting insights into the current

role of women in the police and military institutions, and how revolutionary ideals are slowly being eroded, with old and resilient male values on patriarchal domination gaining hegemony yet again.

The post-conflict transition has not been as smooth as expected. In 2006, tensions within but also between the defence and police forces regarding perceived injustices about promotion, collusion and nepotism threatened to erupt into a civil war, resulting in about 40 deaths and about 20,000 internally displaced persons. Violence resurfaced in 2007 and again in early 2008. These tensions and the fratricide arguably have pushed gender issues to the side. Post-independence has failed to deliver what the Falintil and the Fretilin had fought for; it has also failed to deliver genuine equality of men and women in the military and the police.

### The post-revolutionary glass ceiling

According to the official statistics, of 3,194 PNTL personnel, 581 are women.<sup>3</sup> This compares advantageously to the proportion of women in the far smaller F-FDTL, with 61 women in a force of 706 personnel. In both forces, high positions have generally eluded women, excluding them from key decision-making and consequently the ability to initiate more women-friendly policies. The position of Inspector is the highest rank so far that one single female



Ex-Falintil fighter, Mana Bileza. Viqueque 1995.

has achieved in the PNTL. While there are a few female Sub-Inspectors, the majority of women are Agents and Recruit Agents, with the minimum recruitment criterion being completion of the SMA (High School Degree). The situation is equally bleak in the F-FDTL where only about seven women have achieved the rank of Second Sergeant. In both the police and the defence forces, the majority of women have never been promoted. This generally seems to reflect the 1975-1999 resistance era when there were never any women at the "commander" level in the "official" military ranking, even in the non-statutory forces.

### Positions of power and 'regimes of truth'

Some of the general problems and challenges our research was able to uncover in terms of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) are not unique to Timor Leste, but have been identified in other post-conflict developing countries, such as the problems of abuse of power and corruption.<sup>4</sup> This also includes a huge gap between official aspirations and everyday practice, to the extent that women's agency often is articulated only with a great deal of trepidation and in whispered confidences.

Ironically, this is greatly facilitated by the fact that the 706-strong F-FDTL is regarded as a "symbol of affirmation of independence, a symbol of pride".<sup>5</sup> Any critical questioning, for instance with regard to military personnel who 'act above the law' and violate basic human rights – especially during the 2006 crisis<sup>6</sup> but also during the recent *Operasaun Conjunta* to 'capture' the rebels – is considered almost unacceptable. Instead the prevailing attitude is that "this is a liberation army of the people". This reflexive rhetoric enacts its own symbolic violence in its capacity to sustain a "regime of truth" that makes it impossible for its victims to raise questions.

### Protective silences

One of the challenges of our research project was to understand and read beyond the initial silences of our female interviewees. In some instances, women were unable to speak and express their opinions because their male Commanders insisted on being present during the interviews. In these cases, the women asked us to re-schedule a meeting somewhere else, where they were then able to speak more freely about problems and challenges in their institutions. In other cases, female security personnel appear to have been instructed to provide 'correct, official answers' or to give us 'access' without giving meaningful information. Protective silences with regard to certain questions – such as those regarding dis-