ANONYMOUS

"Poem of Mulan"

A sigh, a sigh, and then again a sigh—
Mulan was sitting at the door and weaving.
One did not hear the sound of loom and shuttle,
One only heard her heave these heavy sighs.
  When she was asked the object of her love,
When she was asked who occupied her thoughts,
She did not have a man she was in love with,
There was no boy who occupied her thoughts.

"Last night I saw the summons from the army,
The Khan is mobilizing all his troops.
The list of summoned men comes in twelve copies:
Every copy lists my father's name!
  My father has, alas, no grown-up son,
And I, Mulan, I have no adult brother.
I want to buy a saddle and a horse,
To take my father's place and join the army."

The eastern market: there she bought a horse;
The western market: there she bought a saddle.
The southern market: there she bought a bridle;
The northern market: there she bought a whip.
  At dawn she said good-bye to her dear parents,
At night she rested by the Yellow River.
She did not hear her parents' voices, calling for their daughter,
She only heard the Yellow River's flowing water, always splashing, splashing.

At dawn she left the Yellow River's bank;
At night she rested on Black Mountain's top.
She did not hear her parents' voices, calling for their daughter,
She only heard the whinnying of Crimson Mountain's Hunnish[1] horsemen.

[1] The Chinese term *hu*, which we here translate as "Hunnish," generally refers to the nomadic populations on China's traditional nothern border (in modern Inner Mongolia).

Myriads of miles: she joined the thick of battle,
Crossing the mountain passes as if flying.
Winds from the north transmitted metal rattles,[2]
A freezing light shone on her iron armor.
A hundred battles and the brass were dead;
After ten years the bravest men returned.

When they returned, they met the Son of Heaven,
The Son of Heaven seated on his throne.[3]
Their honorary rank went up twelve steps,
And their rewards were counted in the millions.
The Khan asked Mulan what he might desire—
"I, Mulan, do not care for an appointment here at court.[4]
Give me your racer good for a thousand miles,[5]
To take me back again to my old hometown."

Hearing their daughter had arrived, her parents
Went out the city, welcoming her back home.
Hearing her elder sister had arrived, her sister
Put on her bright red outfit at the door.
Hearing his elder sister had arrived, her brother
Sharpened his knife that brightly flashed in front of pigs and sheep.

"Open the gate to my pavilion on the east,
Let me sit down in my old western room.
I will take off the dress I wore in battle;
I will put on the skirt I used to wear."
Close to the window she did up her hair;
Facing the mirror she applied makeup.
She went outside and saw her army buddies—

[2] The Chinese commentators here explain the "rattle" as a small iron three-legged pot, which was used for cooking food at daytime and for beating out the watches during nighttime.

[3] The Son of Heaven (the emperor/khan) is said in the original to be seated in the Hall of Light, a ceremonial structure described in ancient books.

[4] More precisely, an appointment as Secretarial Court Gentleman.

[5] That is, a horse (or, according to some editions, a camel) that can run a thousand Chinese miles in a single day (the Chinese mile is roughly one third of an English mile).

Her army buddies were all flabbergasted:
"We marched together for these twelve long years
And absolutely had no clue that Mulan was a girl!"

"The male hare wildly kicks its feet;
The female hare has shifty eyes,
But when a pair of hares runs side by side,
Who can distinguish whether I in fact am male or female?"

Translated by Wilt L. Idema

INTRODUCTION

In the rich Chinese tradition of tales and legends that originated centuries ago and survives to this day, the story of Mulan, with its utter lack of supernatural demonstrations or interventions, is one of the most mundane. A heroine such as Meng Jiangnü successfully destroys the Great Wall with her tears of grief at news of her husband's death; the White Snake takes human form to pursue a worthy scholar and is punished for her vainglory with eternal imprisonment in Thunder Peak Pagoda; and the thwarted lovers Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo are transformed into butterflies after their deaths, so that they can be together forever in lepidopterous love. In contrast, the subject of this volume, Mulan, simply puts on her father's armor and takes on a male identity to go to battle. Yet, the very feasibility of this action is what makes it so compelling, as well as revolutionary. Transformation is not about magic spells or divine intervention: it is about the deliberate and basic action of changing clothes.

Though the story of Mulan has been reiterated over the centuries, a few basic elements have remained constant. A young girl's elderly and sickly father is called up in the draft. The family knows that he is too ill to go, but they have no alternative: they have a daughter (sometimes two), but women are excluded from joining the all-male military, and a son, who is too young to enlist. The father decides that he has no option but to go. Mulan tells her parents that she will serve in his place. To do so, she will need to disguise herself as a man. She goes to the market to buy the necessities for travel and battle, dons her father's armor, and joins a group of young men heading off to war. For a dozen years, she fights side by side with them, preserving her chastity and hiding the fact that she is a woman from even her closest companions. She successfully leads a battle that decisively ends the war and is lauded by the emperor for her efforts. Instead of accepting an official post, she asks to return home to her parents. When she arrives, she returns to her old room, takes off her armor, puts on her dress and makeup, and effortlessly resumes her old life.

There have been variations in the story over the centuries, but they are comparatively minor ones. Different versions emphasize different motives. In some, Mulan is a filial daughter forced into the circumstances by her duty to her father; in others, Mulan is a fiercely patriotic fighter willing to risk her life for her country, where so few men will. Other versions add a romantic subplot: in Xu Wei's

version, Mulan returns home and is promptly married to her next-door neighbor, Mr. Wang, and in the 1930s film version, a troubled attraction between Mulan and a fellow soldier is swiftly resolved when she dresses up as a woman again at the end. The basic structure remains unchanged: a girl becomes a man out of necessity, fulfills the task that required her to change, changes back once the goal is accomplished, and seeks to return to her former life. This matter-of-fact transition from one identity to another is fascinating, and it draws our attention to how much role-playing is a part of life. The multiplicity of identities occurs on multiple layers. Within the Mulan story, of course, we see directly how Mulan takes on and sheds personae according to the various demands of her circumstances. As we will see in the versions in this volume, the story takes different emphases, perhaps influenced by the biases of the author or the cultural climate at the time of its production. Readers, too, project their own particular interests onto Mulan.[1]

Because of this versatility, the legend of Mulan has endured for hundreds of years.[2] This is not to say that the legend's popularity has been consistent since its arrival. Indeed, there is no documentation to suggest that the recognition that Mulan enjoys in the twenty-first century is an unbroken continuation from her appearance in the "Poem of Mulan" more than a millennium ago. The story, as modified to represent Mulan as a Han Chinese loyalist battling an encroaching barbarian outsider, became a neat allegory for growing concerns about national identity and collaboration in the early twentieth century. Likewise, the Annie Oakley aspects of our heroine captured the attention of twentieth-century Chinese women looking for native independent female role models, and those in the West who looked eastward for strong female characters. In the last few decades alone, Maxine Hong Kingston appropriated parts of the Mulan story in her novel *The Woman Warrior;* Disney chose Mulan for its first Chinese heroine in a feature-length animated film; and, at the time of this book's writing, a new film version is in production by a Mainland Chinese studio, and another version is currently in development. Whatever the reasons, although Mulan may not have made much of an impression when she first arrived on the scene, she is now certainly the most recognized Chinese folktale heroine in the world.

[1] Joan Judge has chronicled the push and pull of Mulan as patriot versus Mulan as filial girl from the late-imperial period to the early twentieth century (2008, pp. 143–86).

[2] There is to our knowledge no evidence of a historical Mulan. Sanping Chen has argued, however, that the name "Mulan," which means "magnolia" in Chinese, is derived from a foreign word meaning "bull" or "stag," was a "style" or courtesy name adopted by military men in the fifth and sixth centuries, and was used as a surname by non-Han Chinese families (2005, pp. 23–43).

I. *The "Poem of Mulan" and "Song of Mulan," from the* Collected Works of the Music Bureau

The earliest recorded versions of the Mulan legend are two poems printed in the *Collected Works of the Music Bureau* (*Yuefu shiji*), an anthology compiled by Guo Maoqian in the twelfth century. The first work, "Poem of Mulan" ("Mulan shi"), is undated and anonymous, and it is followed by an imitation, translated in this volume as "Song of Mulan," written by the Tang dynasty official Wei Yuanfu (mid-eighth century). The "Poem of Mulan" contains details, such as the reference to the ruler by the term "khan," that suggest the northeastern conflicts of the Northern Wei period (386–533). Guo Maoqian claims that the poem is taken from the *Musical Records, Old and New* (*Gujin yuelu*), a text that is no longer extant and which dates from approximately the sixth century C.E.[3] This dating was adopted by Xu Wei (1521–1593) as the setting of his influential play, which further secured the tradition of dating the poem to that time, but there is no external corroborating evidence for an exact date of composition. Already in the twelfth century we see a disparity between the two earliest versions of the Mulan legend. The "Poem of Mulan" gives us a final stanza marveling at the difficulties of telling apart male from female, with the image of two hares running together; this image will recur in Xu Wei's play and in a 1939 film version. The "Song of Mulan" emphasizes Mulan's extraordinary demonstration of filial piety and loyalty.

The "Poem of Mulan" begins with the image of Mulan performing the typically female task of weaving while lamenting her situation:

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> When she was asked the object of her love,
> When she was asked who occupied her thoughts,
> She did not have a man she was in love with,
> There was no boy who occupied her thoughts.
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> "Last night I saw the summons from the army,
> The Khan is mobilizing all his troops.
> The list of summoned men comes in twelve copies:
> Every copy lists my father's name!"

[3] Wei, 1979, pp. 373–5.