The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston’s Woman Warrior

Perhaps the best-known Chinese literary figure outside of China, Mulan in several recent English reconfigurations has both inspired and bewildered the American imagination. Among them, Kingston’s rewriting of the Mulan legend in the “White Tigers” chapter of The Woman Warrior is the most controversial.1 The debate it generated has left a deep impression on the study of Asian American literature and transnational cultural production.2 Yet critics on both sides of the debate typically de-historicize Kingston’s Mulan narrative and so preclude a careful examination of the complex connections among Kingston’s story, the Mulan of Chinese tradition, and the Communist revolution led by Mao Zedong.

Critics of Kingston’s revision deny it any historical grounding because they find in it only “distortions of the histories of China and Chinese America” (Fong 67). In their view the revision is first of all a reckless hodgepodge of autobiography, history, and myth. As such, it “violates” the coherence of Chinese historiography and so, in the words of one Chinese American reader, “take[s] away our history, as well as our magic.”3 Second, because Kingston’s reconfiguration reinterprets an indigenous legend from an Orientalist perspective, it perpetuates, they argue, Western prejudices about social relations in Chinese history. Central to both charges is the belief that the original legend of Mulan—inviolable both in form and content—enshrines the essential values of Chinese culture. Thus, in Frank Chin’s well-known critique of Kingston the legend serves a Chinese heroic tradition by celebrating “the perfect Confucian individual” in “Confucian romantic love” (Chin 3, 4, 6n). Such a reification of a “Confucian Mulan” raises a number of issues that have not been addressed either by Kingston’s expert readers in America

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1 Besides Kingston’s prose version, other well-known reconfigurations include David Henry Hwang’s play FOB (1981 OBIE Award) and Disney’s animated cartoon Mulan (1998).

2 Kingston’s representation of Mulan is the central issue in the debate over her use of Chinese materials. See Cheung, Lee, Sau-Ling Wong, Woo, and the second chapter of David Li’s Imagining the Nation.

or by Mulan scholars in China—namely, the precise relation between the Mulan legend and the institutions of Confucian ideology, as well as the role the legend has played throughout Chinese history in helping to construct a “Confucian” vision of the Chinese individual. Both concerns are vitally important to understanding not only the Mulan legend but also Kingston’s recreation.

Kingston’s defenders are equally quick to erase history from her Mulan revision, largely because that seems to be an easy way to neutralize the criticisms of her detractors. The strategy assumes two shapes. The first is to treat Kingston’s Mulan as an American tale by completely removing its association with Chinese history. For instance, in response to Frank Chin’s charge against Kingston’s Mulan, Yan Gao insists: “Her employment of Chinese materials should be explored with an American rather than Chinese point of view, and within the realm of American literature rather than Chinese literature” (4). But Kingston’s Mulan is hardly intelligible if it is read as an “American” tale. Especially for those who view minority experiences in America as informed chiefly by struggles with racism, a story about a girl who in male disguise leads a peasant uprising against the emperor in Beijing seems irrelevant. As a result, the second strategy employed by Kingston’s defenders is to label the story a “fantasy,” a “pure product” of a fertile imagination (Gao 13). Thus, Sau-Ling Wong states that “the ‘White Tigers’ segment on the woman warrior is meant to be read as a fantasy, not historical reconstruction” (“Kingston’s Handling” 29). However, reading Kingston’s Mulan story as an “ahistorical” piece is no less problematic than reading it as a “distortion” of history, for dissociating Kingston’s work from a historical framework considerably reduces the persuasiveness of its social agenda.

Indeed, we must rehistoricize Kingston’s revision of Mulan in order to locate its appropriate position in relation to the Mulan matrix, clarify its historical implications with regard to what Kingston calls “my imaginary China” (Skenazy 8), and examine its ideological underpinnings. It is with these concerns that I revisit the evolution of the Mulan legend and, in that context, re-evaluate Kingston’s revision. I make two major claims. First, initially a hybrid product of multicultural interactions, the image of Mulan became a Chinese icon of heroic patriotism only after a historical process of appropriation—fueled especially by the powerful tradition of orthodox Confucian ethics—turned the folk tale to the service of an imperial hierarchy. Second, Kingston’s English rendition is a “reconstruction” of Chinese history by which she explores the nature of Chinese womanhood in terms of its potentials as well as its limitations. While severely undermining the patriarchal assumptions historically imposed upon the legend, Kingston’s revision also captures the dilemma of the Chinese female caught in the contradiction between individual pursuit and communal commitment under specific historical circumstances—a dilemma that sheds light on the shared identity of

\footnote{Scholars sympathetic with Kingston also subscribe to the assumption that the original legend was a product of the Confucian tradition, although they disagree that such a fact should discredit Kingston’s recreation. The “original text” of Mulan, according to Robert Lee, is “rooted in Confucian patriarchy” (60). David Li asserts that the “prototext” of Mulan, in which is invested “the cultural capital” of feudal China, fully articulates the “Confucian maxim” of a hierarchal social order (“The Naming” 505).}
Kingston's Mulan and the canonized “Confucian” Mulan, both of whom end up serving as the tool for the grand scheme of national salvation.

I

The story about Mulan is told in a ballad now called Mulan shi or “Mulan poem.” It was first recorded in Gujin yuelu (Musical Record Old and New), written by Zhi Jiang of the Chen dynasty in approximately 568 A.D. Zhi Jiang’s work, unfortunately, is no longer extant. The text of this poem available to most readers today comes from the anthology Yuefu shiji (Collection of Music-Bureau Poems), compiled by Guo Maoqian during the twelfth century in the Song dynasty. Guo mentions Gujin yuelu as his source for the poem. Two other Song dynasty anthologies, Wenyuan yinghua (Gems of Literary Writings) and Gu wenyuan (Collection of Ancient Writings), contain slightly different versions of this poem. Guo’s version, however, has been accepted by virtually all scholars as the most authentic, since it seems to preserve more of the basic features of a folk ballad than do the other versions (Yang 399). Wang Yunxi, in supporting Luo Genze’s argument that Guo might have obtained his version directly from Gujin yuelu, even argues that Guo’s text “was not polished by any Tang writers” (120). Guo follows Gujin yuelu by putting the Mulan poem in the group of Northern poems called guijiao hengchuiqu (songs accompanied by drums and horizontal flutes), and recent scholars mostly agree that the poem originated in the Northern Wei, sometime during the fifth to the sixth centuries—a time when the Northern Wei was engaged in a series of wars against foreign invaders (Chen 428; Jiang 130; Lu 246-47; Wang Yunxi 119-20; Yang 401). There have even been efforts to identify the military event in the poem with a famous battle in which Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei defeated the invading Rouran army in 429 A.D. (Wang Rubi 38-40).

The Northern Wei dynasty was established by the tribe of Xianbei, a non-Chinese (i.e., non-Han) nomadic people who conquered and controlled Northern China from 386 to 534 A.D. In the first half of its dynastic rule, the Xianbei aristocracy, including the royal house of Tuoba, seems to have been hostile to Chinese culture and resisted the life style encoded in the Confucian tradition. Later, and especially during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen (471-77), the ruling class of the Northern Wei began to encourage the gradual assimilation of Chinese customs. However, since this change in policy was meant to reduce tension between the conquered Han-Chinese and the Xianbei in order to strengthen the latter’s rule, rather than to endorse the legitimacy of Chinese culture, it seems hardly con-

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5 Wenyuan yinghua was compiled in 982 A.D. by a team headed by Li Fang under an imperial order. Little is known about the original compiler of Gu wenyuan; although it was likely compiled in the Tang dynasty, this anthology was not discovered until the Northern Song period and became known especially through Han Yuanji’s re-editing in the late twelfth century.

6 In his study of the Xianbei aristocracy’s opposition to Confucian ideology, Mo Jiuju cites a compelling incident from Bei shi (The History of the North) in which a Xianbei nobleman was put to death because he was found to be well versed in Confucian classics and to allegedly imitate the life style of ru or Confucian literati (326).
ceivable that the Xianbei would enthusiastically espouse Confucianism, the ideological foundation of Chinese socio-political customs. If at that time the state cult of Confucianism established during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) was still maintained, it would have been in the Southern Chinese empires, not in the Northern Wei where the Mulan poem emerged.

One can of course argue that even though the Mulan poem originated in a non-Chinese state, it could have been the creation of the Han-Chinese there, and that they invested in it their admiration for a Chinese woman whose heroic deeds were sustained by traditional Chinese values. The problem this hypothesis immediately faces, however, is how convincingly to verify Mulan’s ethnicity. As with most legends of remote antiquity, it is fruitless to try to pinpoint Mulan’s ethnic origin. Moreover, the image of Mulan, as a Chinese scholar has noted, is “unprecedented in the classical poetry of our country” (Wang Rubi 41). Her major characteristics—valor, fighting skills, and resourcefulness in military affairs—align her with the images of Northern horsewomen in other yuefu poems of the same period, such as the famous “Li Bo xiaomei ge” (The Song of Li Bo’s Younger Sister) and “Ziliu ma” (The Black-Tailed Red Horse). Alien to the ideal of a gentle and graceful lady celebrated in the Confucian literary tradition of Shi jing (The Book of Poems), these poeticized images of horsewomen reflect the cultural values shared by all the ethnic groups, and the Xianbei in particular, that were then living in war-torn Northern China. In this shared value system, accomplishments in military disciplines are seen as an important part of an individual’s life, whether that individual is a man or a woman. Indeed, among the Northern females portrayed in yuefu poems, Mulan perhaps best epitomizes this shared value system, because she takes up her father’s sword against invaders. Such a literary character could come into being only in a specific social locale and at a special historical moment when the official Chinese ideology—namely Confucianism—had lost its sway and, in its stead, new values were being formed as a result of tremendous social changes and ethnic interactions. In other words, the genesis of the Mulan poem was actually due to the absence of Confucian influence rather than to a desire to celebrate Confucian values.

However, by praising a young person’s dedication to the family and her determination to protect an aging father, the Mulan poem certainly affirms behaviors and values that Confucianism could easily appropriate. Thus, it is not surprising that efforts to Confucianize the story of Mulan began to appear during the Tang dynasty (618-907), which was a transitional stage for the development of Confucianism, whether as a form of learning, a moral philosophy, or a political orthodoxy. After almost four centuries during which the ideological hegemony of Confucianism had lost the authority it had enjoyed during the Han dynasty, Confucianism began to reassert its influence in all aspects of social life in the

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7 Opinions on Mulan’s ethnic identity have varied among Chinese scholars. For instance, while Yao Darong argues that Mulan was from a Han-Chinese family (80, 85), Xu Zhongshu insists that Mulan was of Xianbei stock (82). Recent Chinese scholars tend to downplay this issue by recognizing Mulan as a Northern woman from a region that was then characterized by racial mixture. It is interesting to note that Western scholars, not burdened by Chinese scholars’ anxiety to affirm the continuity of Chinese civilization, do not hesitate to point out Mulan’s “non-Chinese” origin (Nienhauser 77n1; Allen 346).
newly reunified Chinese nation. But Tang Confucianism scarcely offered anything new in theoretical reconstructions—that would have to wait until the fruition of the Song neo-Confucianism; it simply reinstated the doctrines established by the Confucian masters of the Han dynasty. Among these doctrines the most important is the doctrine of *sangang* or the “three cardinal guides,” namely, “monarch guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife.” This doctrine, thought to be derived from the Heavenly *Dao* or Way, functioned as the supreme guiding principle of all social formations, serving the need of the Tang empire and its dynastic successors to legitimize both patriarchal hierarchy and the authority of its rulers. The doctrine also regulated the behaviors of individual persons by requiring virtues that helped maintain the stability, as well as the harmony, of social relations.

Central to the *sangang* doctrine is the cardinal virtue of *xiao* (filial piety), for Confucianism regards the family as the foundational unit on which all social structures are anchored. In addition to a child’s obedience to the parents, *xiao* also stresses the child’s obligation to preserve the honor and continuity of the family. The virtue of *xiao* informs the virtue of *zhong* (loyalty to the monarch), because in Confucian politics the state is conceived of as an enlarged family in which the monarch-subject relation is the social extension of the father-son relation. These two Confucian values began to be attached to the Mulan legend during the Tang period, and even laid the ideological foundation for the emergence of many Mulan temples in which the legendary girl was enshrined. The third virtue central to the *sangang* doctrine is *jie* or chastity (preserving the marital fidelity of the wife or the virginal purity of an unmarried woman). This tenet, which did not gain momentum until after Song neo-Confucian masters such as Cheng Yi vehemently propagated it, informs many later revisions of the Mulan narrative. Finally, according to Confucian moralists, *lie* or heroism reinforces the practice of the first three cardinal virtues. *Lie* does not refer to a heroism that fights for individual dignity, as Frank Chin claims in his discussion of the Mulan text; rather, it designates the heroism of maintaining one’s moral integrity in conformity with the “three cardinal guides,” even at the cost of one’s life. In the following pages I will focus on four versions of the Mulan story created between the Tang and Qing periods in order to analyze how these Confucian concepts came to pervade historical reconstructions of Mulan. This genealogy, brief as it is, will give us a clear sense of the folk tale’s evolution into an instrument for ideological struggles, a process in which the tale was constantly rewritten by mainstream Chinese writers to serve specific political premises.

The first important Mulan revision is the so-called second Mulan poem, which Guo Maoqian puts immediately after the original Mulan poem in *Yuefu shiji*. Its author is Wei Yuanfu (?-771), a high-ranking Tang official. Wei’s poem reproduces the tale of Mulan but with significant modifications. In the original poem Mulan declines the award of a ministerial post upon her triumphant return from war. Wei’s version omits that detail, probably because Wei deemed it inappropriate to offer a woman a share in political power. Furthermore, whereas in the original narrative Mulan maintains an individual voice, which alternates between third-person and first-person perspectives, in Wei’s poem, the “I” is completely
replaced by a third-person narrator speaking on behalf of a dominating, impersonal, moral authority. The most striking change comes in the ending of Wei’s poem. The original work ends with the famous image of rabbits, an image which conveys an ancient notion of gender equality by suggesting that external differences between the male and the female are insignificant in the world of nature. Wei replaces that ending with these four lines:

How laudable is Mulan’s virtuous integrity,
Serving as the model of the monarch’s subjects.
Her unswerving loyalty and filial devotion
Will be remembered even after thousands of years.

(Guo 375; my translation)

By deploying the virtues of absolute loyalty and filial piety as its primary theme, Wei’s poem attempts to perpetuate a Confucian reading of the Mulan tale.

The dramatic work *Ci Mulan tifu congjun* (Female Mulan Took Her Father’s Place in the Army) by Xu Wei (1521-93), a Ming writer especially known for his relentless critique of Confucian ritualism, presents a reading of the Mulan legend very different from Wei’s. Xu is perhaps the first to give Mulan the surname “Hua” (or “Fa” in Kingston’s Cantonese pronunciation). With a newly invented plot that is completely free of Wei’s moralizing on Mulan’s submission to patriarchal authority, Xu’s play enhances the appeal of Mulan’s story by dramatizing her military exploits against a group of bandits headed by Leopard Skin of Black Mountains. Xu seeks to make a case for a Chinese tradition of female heroism by attributing Mulan’s inspirations to the legends of two ancient Chinese women, Ti Ying of the Western Han and Qin Xiu of the Three Kingdoms. In fact, the play is one of very few classical Chinese works by a major male writer that openly celebrates the strength and wisdom of women. In this regard, it goes further than the original Mulan poem by asserting that women, often stronger than men, “can stand upright on their two legs between heaven and earth” (45).

The plot of Xu Wei’s play was later utilized by the Qing novelist Zhang Shaoxian in his *Bei Wei qishi guixiaodie zhuang* (The Legendary Story of a Filial and Heroic Girl from the Northern Wei).* But Zhang’s aims is to reinsert the theme established by Wei Yuanfu, that is, “to inspire the virtues of loyalty and filial piety in the reader’s heart” (“Preface” 2). To that end, Zhang makes some radical changes. Two inventions in his novel are especially noteworthy. Unlike Xu’s play, in which Leopard Skin’s followers are a motley group of bandits in remote mountains, Zhang’s novel portrays Mulan’s enemies as well-organized rebels motivated by a clear political agenda: to overthrow the ruling emperor. In feudal China, any action against the emperor was the most heinous of crimes, because the monarch, the “Son of Heaven,” must be worshiped as the earthly representative of

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8 Little is known about either the author or the exact date of composition. The earliest available edition of this work is dated 1850. Both this work and *Zhongxiaogongli qinu zhuang*, which I will discuss next, enjoy a privileged place in the canonized tradition of the Chinese classic novel and both are included in *Guzin xiaoshuojicheng* (The Collection of Classical Novels), published in 1990 by Shanghai guji chubanshe. This multi-volume collection of about five hundred “representative novels from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties,” according to the editorial preface, is a gigantic publication project sponsored by the Chinese government and assisted by experts from many universities in China.
Divinity. Putting Mulan on the side of the divine order and pitting her against the forces of chaos and destruction makes her accomplishments not only more commendable in a moral sense, but also more "politically correct" from Zhang's point of view.

The other significant invention in Zhang's novel is Mulan's sacrifice of her marriage for the cause of the emperor. During her military adventures, Mulan unexpectedly meets a young woman named Lu Wanhua. Because Wanhua is a strategically important person from the enemy camp, and because her surrender would therefore tremendously undermine the force of the rebels and help the imperial army achieve a decisive victory, Mulan tries to win over this woman by offering her a happy and secure future. In order to do this, Mulan promises that she will arrange for Wanhua and herself to marry the same man, a distinguished imperial official to whom Mulan has been betrothed. What's more, Mulan even says that she will let Wanhua be the first wife and will accept for herself the inferior position of second wife. Mulan's promise is an extremely unusual sacrifice, because in the hierarchical society of pre-modern China, a society in which a person's mingfen or social status is more important than the person's life, a "second" wife is no more than a concubine. Events unfold according to Mulan's plan: after the rebels are wiped out, the emperor issues an order allowing the two women to marry the same man.

In addition to loyalty and filiality, the doctrine of chastity and its implied expectation of female martyrdom also constitute a major theme in Ming and Qing revisions of the Mulan tale. Representative of this type of reconfiguration is Zhongxiaoyonglie qinu zhuang (The Legendary Story of a Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Heroic, and Chaste), written after 1732 by an anonymous writer. This novel is the most radical revision of the Mulan tale to date; it is perhaps also the most successful, because it remains today the most popular prose account of Mulan's accomplishments. For one thing, the novel completely Siniticizes the Mulan legend by asserting that the creator of the original Mulan poem, to which the novel is indebted, was the renowned Chinese general Li Jing of the Tang dynasty (571-649). Moreover, in the novel, Mulan is given a more recognizable Chinese surname "Zhu" and is said to be born in the southern province Huguang (the present Hubei Province). This Mulan is thus no longer a Northern girl with obscure ethnic origins, but a Han-Chinese woman. Even the emperor whom Mulan serves is no longer the khan of the "barbarian" Xianbei, but Emperor Taizong (627-49) of the Tang dynasty, the paragon of imperial wisdom and benevolence in orthodox Chinese historiography.

Here, Mulan is born into a family with a long tradition of devotion to Confucianism. "Starting her formal education at five and learning the Thirteen [Confucian] Classics by heart" (162), this Mulan believes that loyalty to the state and filial duty are identical, that the state and the family, with their shared interests incarnated in the monarch, cannot be separated, and that a virtuous person should therefore have no other goal than total dedication to imperial service. Accord-

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9 The novel was reprinted several times during the 1990s alone. It is also the only prose version of the Mulan tale available for free reading and downloading at major Chinese book sites on the Internet, such as: <www.shulu.net>, <www.shuku.net:8080>, and <www.cnread.net>.
ingly, when the need arises to save the country from foreign invasion and to rescue her family from the disgrace that results from her father’s inability to serve in the army, Mulan willingly embraces her duty by taking her father’s place in the army.

Ironically, the Confucian education that empowers Mulan also leads to her death. Mulan’s parents die while she is at the front, and after returning home, Mulan vows to take care of her parents’ tombs for the rest of her life, declining the emperor’s invitation to serve at the imperial court. Mulan’s refusal to return to the capital triggers a scandal, and, given the emperor’s repeated summons, she confronts an apparently unsolvable dilemma: if Mulan obeys the emperor, she will break her filial vow; if, on the other hand, she fulfills her filial obligation, she will violate the rule of absolute loyalty to the emperor required of all subjects. With no way out, Mulan kills herself and requests that her body be buried by her parents’ tombs and her heart be taken to the emperor by the imperial envoy. The message this pathetic ending conveys is that only in death can the “Confucian” Mulan preserve her integrity as an obedient daughter, loyal subject, and chaste virgin.

II

Mulan’s wretched fate within the revisionist discourse of Confucianism gives Kingston’s project of resurrecting the girl a moral justification, even though Kingston might not be aware of the historical transformation of the legend in the Chinese tradition. Her source for the legend was her mother’s Cantonese “chants.” As Kingston recalls, she “learned to talk” by repeating these chants, which as a child she imagined were somehow connected with her parents’ life in a Chinese village. In other words, the legend was part of the ethnic upbringing that impacted young Kingston’s intellectual growth and fostered an unconscious attachment to the ancestral land. Yet Kingston’s own version of the Mulan tale incorporates a variety of additional elements as well as years of rethinking. Forming the bulk of the “White Tigers” chapter in her novel, the Mulan story is in fact the author’s strategy to negotiate her Chinese heritage. For a Chinese American, China and Chinese culture always impose memories that must either be rejected or reclaimed in order to achieve a sense of origin that is essential to establishing a compelling connection between Chinese and American identities. Kingston’s revision serves such a purpose by reconstructing Chinese history, the dynamics of which, in Kingston’s conception, has often derived from female power.

Accordingly, the Mulan story in *The Woman Warrior* involves two narratives: a personal narrative relating the narrator’s quest for her true self, and a national

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10 Mulan’s recently discovered beauty may play a role in the emperor’s summons. Yao Darong has identified five versions of the Mulan story from the Ming and Qing dynasties that explicitly depict the emperor’s desire to take Mulan as an imperial concubine once he finds out that she is a beautiful lady (84).

11 Kingston explains to an interviewer: “You know my mother did the chant of Fa Mu Lan. I learned to talk by repeating those things. I never knew until I went to college . . . that that was important poetry. I just thought it was my parents’ tales. My brother thought, oh, those are village ditties. They sing that on the farm” (Skenazy 99).
narrative delineating how a revolution leads to the founding of a “new” China. On the surface, this structure is designed to give Mulan’s life a sort of authenticity by placing her actions in a specific historical context. Underlying the structure, however, is the author’s endeavor to explore the possibility that the female subject’s search for individual salvation can be reconciled with her expected contribution to national redemption. As a Chinese American who had never been to China before she wrote The Woman Warrior, Kingston’s creative imagination had to rely on mediated information coded with fixed, and often conflicting, views about Chinese history. Because these source materials do not allow a consistent space for an idealized female subjectivity, as Kingston’s Mulan story develops, the personal narrative is gradually subordinated to the national narrative, and the individual heroine increasingly becomes simply the instrument for fashioning a “new” Chinese nationhood.

The centerpiece of the personal narrative is a search for self-salvation that comes as a reaction to the terrifying death of the nameless Chinese aunt in the preceding story told by the narrator’s mother. To escape from the fate of growing up a “slave-wife,” the fate of the majority of women in feudal China, the narrator wants to become a woman warrior capable of protecting and controlling her own life. The quest starts at a fantastic moment when the voice of young Maxine merges with Mulan’s account of a journey into the mountains initiated by the call of a mysterious bird. In the eyes of Mulan, the flying bird with “two black wings” ideographically signifies ren or “human” (WW 20). This detail suggests the romantic notion that only nature, the realm free from the corruption of culture and history, can provide Mulan with enlightenment about her humanity and womanhood. In the mountains, Mulan encounters two old martial artists who offer to be her teachers. But their curriculum concentrates not so much on fighting skills as on the secrets of nature. Using nature as the proto-text of truth, the old couple teaches Mulan to gain first-hand knowledge about life from animals and birds. Mulan’s fifteen years of training in the wilderness not only permit her to understand her body and mind intimately, but also teach her how to utilize her physical strength and creative intelligence as part of the natural order of things.

The depiction of Mulan’s experience in the wilderness, which forms one of the most poetic portions of the book, is highly original, full of enchanting images that testify to Kingston’s unusual imaginative power. Indeed, it establishes the surrealistic tone that characterizes the overall style of The Woman Warrior, a style constructed largely from fragments of traditional Chinatown literature (notably martial arts fiction), ghost stories, myth, and kung fu movies. In Kingston’s hands these narrative sub-genres, which are often marginalized in the Chinese literary tradition, become illuminating strategies to sustain a story that generates meaning allegorically. It is largely through such a stylistic choice that Kingston establishes her own voice as something more than that of a mere re-teller of old stories.

Mulan’s fast-paced drama in the mountains is presented to the audience by the first-person narrator. To assign Mulan the role of authoring her own story is a significant revision of traditional representations of Mulan and resonates with the familiar feminist model of relating authorship to authority. Previous revisions of the Mulan narrative in the Chinese tradition are always dominated by a
third-person narrator speaking from a pointedly male perspective. Even in the original poem from Guo Maoqian’s anthology, Mulan’s utterances, which account for about one third of the poem, are frequently interrupted by indirect speeches that suggest the presence of a male interpolator. Kingston’s is the first work that allows Mulan to speak directly to the audience without allowing a male mediator to superimpose his desires on her thoughts and actions. It is not until the second half of the Mulan story that the “I” gradually becomes “we,” a shift that transforms Mulan into a voice of the Chinese masses. The eventual assimilation of Mulan’s individual voice into the chorus of her people signals the story’s departure from self-possessive feminism.

Even during the time when she is fully preoccupied with her self-development, there are already signs that Mulan is bound to transcend self-assertion. One day near the end of her “survival test,” Mulan witnesses her two masters turn into angels and dance in a manner that seems to impart some truth to her:

Then the dancers danced the future—a machine-future—in clothes I had never seen before. I am watching the centuries pass in moment because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star. And I understand how working and hoeing are dancing; how peasant clothes are golden, as king’s clothes; how one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman. (WW/27)

The sudden revelation about a cosmically inherent equality between different classes, as well as between man and woman, marks a turning moment in Mulan’s life. Afterward, as her training moves into the second phase, she apparently receives more instruction on social subjects than on skills necessary for survival and warfare. Most importantly, her masters endow her with an “outlook” symbolized by the magic gourd. Through this magic device, Mulan comes to see that, because girls and boys like herself inevitably become slaves to the rich, the only solution is to wipe out these wicked “fat men” or barons. The two masters also tell Mulan that she should not avenge only her own family, “but whole families” (WW/32).

Her personal story becomes a national allegory when Mulan, now back in her village, joins the peasant uprising. For one thing, Mulan’s new commitment undermines her earlier quest, since she must give up her claim to full womanhood by disguising her true identity under male clothes, personal compromise that she has to make for the sake of a public cause. As if to compensate for what she has lost, however, Mulan can now partake of the power and glory traditionally attributed only to male heroes in Chinese history, and in particular to Yue Fei (WW 34-35) and Guan Gong (Kingston’s Kuan Kung, WW 38). Mulan thus exchanges her individuality for a place in a collective myth of heroism and patriotism.

In this new capacity, Mulan succeeds in staging a national drama of revolution and acts as the spokesperson for all the participants. The strength and insights with which Mulan leads the uprising come from a racial recollection of historical necessities rather than private perceptions. As she observes on her northbound military campaign, “We were better equipped than many founders of dynasties had been when they walked north to dethrone an emperor; they had been peasants like us” (WW 36-37). The idea that rulers of previous empires had been ordinary persons before they seized power is Kingston’s contribution to the development of the Mulan legend; it denies feudal rulers a “divine right” to the
throne and holds them responsible for social disruption. This political perspective gives Mulan’s public actions an ideological cogency that reflects the patterns of dynastic change in Chinese history. Her story thus also posits a historical determinism that views social changes as historical repetitions of the unified will of the people. This explains why the only change Mulan implements on behalf of “the Chinese population” after she takes over Peiping (Beijing) is to replace the old tyrant with a new peasant-emperor, to whom the masses immediately swear allegiance:

The depth and width of joy were exactly known to me: the Chinese population. After much hardship a few of our millions had arrived together at the capital. We faced our emperor personally. We beheaded him, cleaned out the palace, and inaugurated the peasant who would begin the new order. In his rags, he sat on the throne facing the south, and we, a great red crowd, bowed to him three times. (WW 42)

A new empire is born; like all previous dynasties, the calendar of the new dynasty also starts from “year one,” symbolically setting time back again to its beginning. After one more battle, Mulan formally declares to her people that the “new year” of the nation begins (WW 45). Yet one has to wonder what exactly is “new” about this nation, since its establishment simply repeats an age-old pattern of dynastic replacement and retains an equally old system of imperial dictatorship.

The historical specificities surrounding Mulan’s rebellion deserve special attention, since Kingston’s Mulan story has often been denied any claim to historical authenticity, even by her admirers. Indeed, Kingston’s historical reconstruction of China in the Mulan story is characteristic of a second-generation Chinese American, whose knowledge of China comes from a variety of sources that typically mingle historical fact with hearsay. These sources include memories of first-generation immigrants, Chinatown culture, letters from relatives back in China, and English publications during the 1960s and 1970s reflecting views about China from both the left and the right. These sources provide only historical fragments, which then must be placed into a historical scheme that is coherent and understandable. In the scheme that Kingston chooses, Chinese history is reduced to a cycle of class struggles manifested in peasant uprisings. Two historical moments are particularly relevant to her reconstruction. One is the uprising described in the classical Chinese novel Shuihu zhuan (Water Margin), from which she derives the title “White Tigers.”12 The other is the Communist revolution led by Mao Zedong. Both are very familiar to the Chinese people and to readers of Chinese literature and history.

In Kingston’s reconstruction, Mao’s revolution seems to be the more important of the two. Mao appears twice in The Woman Warrior. On one occasion “Chairman Mao” is described as a ruler who tries “to make the Chinese care for people outside the family” (WW 16); on the other occasion, he is said to be engaged in “freeing women from prison” (WW 190). To a large extent, the peasant-emperor that Mulan crowns in Beijing is modeled—in a comical manner—on a Mao whom

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12 Kingston herself referred to the famous group of bandits in this classical novel when asked about the image of the white tiger: “There’s a sanctuary and a haven that’s called the Mountain of the Two Dragons and the White Tigers ... There are 108 bandits who live at that place” (Skenazy 138).
many Westerners regarded as a peasant chief rather than a Marxist leader.\textsuperscript{13} There are also many allusions in the narrative to Mao's Red Army, which was comprised mainly of peasant soldiers. For instance, Mulan's rebelling peasants wear red clothes, put on red armbands, and hold up red flags (WW 37). The image of Mulan is associated with a "girl Communist soldier" later in the work (WW 120-21). In addition, the description of Mulan's post-war activities includes details that will be familiar to readers conversant with the history of Communist China—for example, the public trial of a landlord at a village meeting before his execution, the confiscation of his property, and its redistribution among the peasants. These events clearly recall the Land Reform launched by the Chinese Communists immediately after their 1949 victory.

The Mulan story thus can be read as a reflection on the history of a revolutionary China, a China toward which Kingston maintains an ambivalent attitude. There are actually two Chinas on Kingston's historical map: the old feudal China and the new red China. Her view of the old China is very negative, partly from parental influence. It is not uncommon that Chinese immigrants, either from personal experiences or out of the need to legitimate their permanent abandonment of the ancestral land, describe the old China to their American-born children as a sort of dystopia, uninhabitable especially for women. We find such parents, for instance, in Jade Snow Wong's \textit{Fifth Chinese Daughter} and Amy Tan's \textit{The Joy Luck Club}.\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, in \textit{The Woman Warrior} the narrator's father claims that according to Confucius, "a husband may kill a wife who disobeys him" (WW 193). Furthermore, these impressions about China and Chinese culture were often reinforced for Kingston's generation of Chinese Americans by university courses that presented the social formations of traditional China as exemplifying an "Oriental despotism" that was hostile to both individual freedom and gender equality. Kingston has herself asserted that "women in the old China did not choose" (WW 7) and that the established Chinese term for women is "slave" (WW 51).

Nor does Kingston approve of the China created by Mao's revolution. Kingston's family had a number of close relatives in China, who were considered wealthy because they owned land. When the Communists took power in 1949, these relatives—"landlords" according the Communists—were either executed or deprived of their property.\textsuperscript{15} Those who remained alive often sent letters to Kingston's family in America filled with nightmarish news that made her mother weep and her father scream "in his sleep" (WW 50). There are many passages in \textit{The Woman}

\textsuperscript{13} For instance, both Pearl Buck and Edgar Snow thought that Mao led a peasant uprising (Buck 162; Snow, \textit{Red Star} 100).

\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Fifth Chinese Daughter}, the narrator's father says: "You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women" (246). Likewise, all the Chinese-born mothers in \textit{The Joy Luck Club} fill their children's minds with painful stories of China. Their critique of the home country, in sharp contrast to their over-idealized perception of the host country, is summarized in an immigrant woman's wish that opens the book: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch . . . And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrows" (17).

\textsuperscript{15} In a 1979 interview, Kingston notes: "The older generation feels it's a very terrible place [China]. If any of us go, something bad will happen to us. We will get killed or something. In my family, just about all the men were killed in the revolution" (Skenazy 8).
That depict the sufferings of these relatives under the Communist rule. Sometimes the narrator is filled with so much hatred toward the Communists that she even dreams of avenging her family, “storm[ing] across China to take back our farm from the Communists” (WW 49).

However, Kingston’s feminist impulses paradoxically require a very different view of Communist China. During the 1960s and early 1970s, liberal intellectuals in the West generally entertained a sympathetic, yet romanticized, view of contemporary China. Their understanding of Mao’s revolution was largely informed by a limited number of books by Western writers who had some first-hand knowledge of China—Edgar Snow’s Red Star Over China and Red China Today, Helen Snow’s Women in Modern China, and Pearl Buck’s China: Past and Present, among them. These works typically presented the Communist revolution as a justifiable peasant movement, driven by the lofty goal of establishing a just society. Moreover, their reports also suggested that the Communist revolution would eventually emancipate women from the oppressions of feudal China. For instance, Edgar Snow popularized a story about Mao that portrays the revolutionary leader as a victim of the feudal system of arranged marriages.\(^\text{16}\) This story in turn was partly responsible for convincing Western feminists. Julia Kristeva for one, that Mao was a serious supporter of women’s causes (Kristeva 105-6), and Kingston also uses it to account for Mao’s rebellion and his commitment to women’s liberation (WW 190).

Evidently, then, Kingston conceives of two very different versions of a revolutionary China. One is the “new” China where “the Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women what they wanted: a job and a room of their own” (WW 62). This is a heroic China founded by the Communists, who have inherited Mulan’s legacy and mission. The other is a China in which the Communist victory was won by killing many innocent people, including Kingston’s family members, and destroying people’s property. This demonic China, achieved by violent means and ruled through terror and dictatorship, is as repressive as the old China that it seeks to replace and, as such, is just one more illustration of the vicious cycle of Chinese history. “The news from China has been confusing;” the narrator confesses in The Woman Warrior, for she cannot tell whether the Communists or her relatives are lying (50). Longing for truth, she repeatedly expresses her wish “to go to China . . . to find out what’s a cheat story and what’s not” (WW 206)—a wish that, of course, could not be granted during the early 1970s when Kingston composed The Woman Warrior.

This overwhelming sense of historical uncertainty has a profound impact on the new Chinese nation that Kingston reconstructs in her fictional world and on the Chinese female subjectivity that she places in that imagined space. The way in which Mulan and the rebellion are described not only reveals that contradiction, but also indicates the author’s attempt to reconcile her contradictory views of Communist China and its historical possibilities. On the one hand, Mulan’s uprising is portrayed as the unavoidable result of rampant social corruption, as a

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\(^{16}\) In his famous interview with Snow, Mao states that, when he was only fourteen, his parents tried to marry him to a woman of twenty, but he never accepted this arrangement. Snow relates this story twice, first in Red Star Over China (147) and later in Red China Today (171).
revolution that manages to accomplish much of its agenda by restoring social order and the rule of justice, at least temporarily. On the other hand, the uprising does not really change substantially the socio-political system that caused the uprising in the first place. With the reinstating of the new emperor, Mulan’s armed rebellion only serves to renew the old system, and thus helps to maintain the continuity of a Chinese empire that is the root cause of the social problems she addresses. Ironically, Mulan’s knowledge that dynastic changes have occurred over and over again in Chinese history both strengthens her rebellious spirit by giving her a strong sense of legitimacy and confidence in eventual triumph and reduces her endeavors to rebuilding the empire according to century-old patterns.

The historical force that turns a revolution into a restoration does not permit the pursuit of the individual interests that had constituted the initial driving force for the revolution. This is particularly true in the case of the “woman warrior,” whose life as a fighter ends as soon as the empire is restored. It is not surprising that Mulan is unable to find a position for herself in the new power structure, even though she has “mothered” its rebirth; nor is there evidence that the new emperor will give her such a position. The deeply entrenched patriarchal system of this “new” nation, feudalist or Communist, is far from ready to let the female fighter share political power. Consequently, when the war is over, Mulan has no place to go except the traditional role expected of all Chinese women—namely, the role of a “dutiful” wife and a “filial” daughter. When she comes back home, Mulan kneels “at the feet” of her parents-in-law and assures them that, since her “public duties are finished,” she will stay home “doing more farmwork and housework, and giving [them] more sons” (WW 45). Now an amazingly submissive, self-effacing woman, Mulan finds herself thoroughly content with being the national model of “perfect filiality” (WW 45). Moreover, it is important to note that in a culture historically characterized both by gender bias in favor of male inheritance and by the demand for absolute obedience to patriarchal authority, Mulan’s promise to produce “more sons” and to maintain “perfect filiality” is by no means a happy return to domesticity, but rather a bitter reconciliation with the socio-political system from which she tried to run away years ago when summoned by the “humanist” bird.

Mulan’s final choice, which subverts much of what she set out to achieve when embarking on the career of a woman warrior, is doubtless disappointing to those who would like to see her carry to the end the cause of feminism or liberal individualism. But it is perhaps the only choice for Mulan in the specific historical context in which the author sets the story. There is no way Kingston can convincingly idealize Mulan’s case to the point of envisioning a life or a career in which her character could enjoy a thorough self-autonomy either as a woman or a societal member; to do so would be as deceptive as the rumor about the group of “witch amazons” in the same Mulan story, whose “reality” the narrator “could not vouch for” (WW 45). The internal logic of the Mulan narrative requires a homecoming. Partly based on her perception of the “reality” of Chinese history, and partly out of her deeply communitarian vision,17 Kingston has to send Mulan home

17 In an interview with Bill Moyers, Kingston envisions the ideal communally oriented man as follows: “Maybe a good man is a Confucian man. And I think of a Confucian man as one who comes
to complete the last step in rebuilding community: the heroine’s commitment to the “whole families” of laobaixing or “the people of one hundred surnames” (WW 32, 42). In the traditional culture of China, “community” is never an abstract concept, but a concrete social framework sustained by specific renlun or “human relations” between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, one friend and another. Such a formulation defines an individual as a relational being and positions her or him in reciprocal obligations to others in the family, the clan, and the society. In all renlun, as I have pointed out in my analysis of the sangang doctrine, the father-son relation is the paradigmatic bond on which the entire social structure is modeled. A communal structure built on these relations is a hierarchical order that often entails the subordination of the values of a lower level to the needs of a higher level, and the sacrifice of individual interests for the sake of a system claiming to serve the collective interests of the people. Mulan’s final self-effacement, then, suggests that it is not yet possible for Chinese women to transcend historical realities and obtain complete self-emancipation.

Kingston’s reconfiguration thus deliberately falls short of providing an alternative model of Chinese female subjectivity, despite its forceful challenge to conventional gender prejudices. Kingston captures the cultural contradictions I have traced above in a reinterpretation of Mulan that ironically reaffirms the Confucian model of the relationship between the individual and the state. In fact, the Mulan in Kingston’s portrayal bears more affinity with the “Confucian” Mulans discussed in the first half of this essay than with the iconoclastic Mulan in Xu Wei’s play. What aligns Kingston’s Mulan with, say, Zhang Shaoxian’s Mulan, is her willingness to subordinate her individual pursuit to the grand scheme of revitalizing the Chinese nation, incarnated in the emperor. The sole difference is that Zhang’s Mulan subjects herself to a monarch who would maintain that his power derives from the “Heavenly mandate,” whereas Kingston’s Mulan shows her allegiance to a monarch who would claim that his power is endorsed by the underprivileged masses. Both versions assert that one finds meaning in life by serving a purpose larger than the self, and that identity resides not in individuality, but in a set of social relations that begins in the family and ends in the absolute authority of the state. Kingston’s Mulan thus stands for the “past” that her creator wants to leave behind, not a future to “reach for.”18 That is why Kingston has reminded readers that “We can’t and shouldn’t model ourselves after her” (cited in Kim 93).

Having said this, I do not mean to conclude that Kingston’s Mulan is a failed representation of the Chinese female, but rather seek to highlight Kingston’s dialectical characterization of her, a characterization which rests on Kingston’s awareness of the contradictions inherent in the historical conditions within which

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18 Kingston was surprised by her readers’ enormous interest in Mulan: “How stubbornly Americans hang on to the oriental fantasy can be seen in their picking ‘The White Tigers’ chapter as their favorite. Readers tell me it ought to have been the climax. But I put it at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for” (“Cultural Mis-reading” 57)
Mulan exists. Kingston’s recreation should be evaluated from two perspectives. First, it is a marvelous addition to the Mulan gallery—unique among modern versions of the narrative because of its coherence, intellectual depth, and moral sincerity. Second, her recreation offers a keen insight into Chinese culture—especially in regard to women, family, tradition, and nation building. These are issues that have preoccupied the minds of Chinese writers at home and abroad since the beginning of the last century. If Kingston has not given us a compelling solution to these issues, neither has any other writer of her generation.

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