

Mulan's Near Execution - A Disney Fabrication

By Feng Xin-ming

http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Disney_Mulan.pdf

Return to "Papers" Page: <http://www.tsoidug.org/papers.php>



PHOTO: Imperial China did not consider women joining the army a crime - this temple was built during the Tang Dynasty (approx. 600 to 900 C.E.), a dynasty established a century or so after she performed her deeds, and a dynasty in which an emperor conferred upon her the posthumous title of "Xiao (good to parents) and Fiercely Loyal General" or "*xiao lie jiang jun* 孝烈将军". The temple compound was expanded and renovated in 1201, 1334 and 1806 by subsequent imperial governments. (Photo source: 爱自由旅游网 http://www.izy.cn/travel_photo/006/191328.html)

1. Introduction

Whatever merit the 1998 Disney movie "Mulan" may have, and of artistic merit that movie has a great deal, it has a very serious flaw: the fabrication of history where, upon discovering that the soldier Mulan is a woman, the Chinese army captain goes to execute her "according to the law." Then, when the captain cannot bring himself to killing her as she has just heroically saved his life, he and the troops turn their backs and abandon her, wounded and ostracized, in the mountain snows. Now this treatment occurs right after she has not only courageously rescued the captain at great risk to herself, but also single-handedly stopped the invading hordes of Shanyu by burying them in a snow avalanche. According to the Disney movie, in Chinese culture women are such contemptible, low-class objects that for a woman to disguise herself and usurp the superior position of a man is an unforgivable crime, a crime that warrants mandatory execution no matter how many great deeds have been done; that Mulan has performed earth-shaking deeds of great merit and

heroism, including saving the whole of China, only makes her all the more deserving of punishment: she has brought shame and “loss of face” to the men, in that they have been eclipsed by as inferior a being as a woman.

2. The True View of Women in Traditional Chinese Culture

Of course, historically the Chinese army does no such thing, and traditional Chinese culture condones no such travesty. In the historical “Ballad of Mulan” (木蘭詞) that Mulan’s joining the army disguised as a man might be a crime is never even contemplated. And that ballad is definitely from the days of Imperial China, written purportedly sometime in the 500’s A.D., during the Northern Wei Dynasty, the time when the story is set. The ballad is also known widely among Chinese people; in fact I’ve memorized sections of it as part of the elementary school curriculum at age ten in Hong Kong. At the end of the ballad Mulan voluntarily discloses her sexual identity to her wartime comrades by reverting to feminine dress and putting on makeup. When the comrades are shocked that they haven’t been able to tell during all those twelve years of fighting and living together, the ballad says in a light-hearted tone that of course one can’t tell—when two rabbits run together, who can tell which one is male and which one female ?

Far from being an isolated exception, this kind of tolerance towards women fighters serving in the army has been a prevalent cultural attitude in Imperial China. Besides the “Ballad of Mulan,” there is also on the historical record at least one opera lauding Mulan, an opera written by Xu Wei (徐渭)¹ during the Ming Dynasty. Similarly, the woman warrior Mu Guiying (穆桂英) and the Yang Family Female Generals (楊門女將 *yang men nu jiang*) have been celebrated in book and song since possibly as early as the 1000’s A.D. Also, in the famous historical novel from the 1300’s, “Water Margin” (水滸傳 *shui hu zhuan*), which extols an army of rebel heroes, three of the one hundred and eight chieftains in that army are women². Besides, from the recorded Chinese history of over 3,000 years ago onward, there have been other women fighters and commanders, such as Fu Hao (婦好, died 1200 B.C.E.), Pan Bao-zhu (潘寶珠, from the same dynasty as Mulan - the Northern Wei), Shan Ying (冼英), Princess Ping Yang (平陽公主), Chen Shuo-zhen (陳碩貞), Yang Miao-zhen (楊妙真), Tang Sai-er (唐賽兒), Qin Liang-yu (秦良玉), She Xiang (奢香), Madam Wa (瓦氏夫人), Shen Yun-ying (沈雲英), Kong Si-zhen (孔四貞), Feng Wan-zhen (馮婉貞), Qiu Jin (秋瑾), Liang Hong-yu (梁紅玉), etc. Traditional Chinese culture, therefore, definitely does not consider it unthinkable or criminal for women to serve in warfare. Quite the opposite, women serving in warfare are admired and praised.

¹ From *Ci Hai* (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 1400, under the entry “mulan” (木蘭).

² The three are “Ten-Foot Blue” Hu the Third Lady (「一丈青」扈三娘 “*yi zhang qing*” *hu san niang*), “Mother Tiger” First Auntie Gu (「母大蟲」顧大嫂 “*mu da chong*” *gu da sao*), and “Mother Night Demon” Sun the Second Lady (「母夜叉」孫二娘 “*mu ye cha*” *sun er niang*).

In traditional China, women are not thought of as trash whose very lives are, as this Disney movie portrays, less important than having self-centered and insecure men not “lose face” over being outdone in defending the country. Look at Chinese tradition in marriage, for example. In some (non-Chinese) traditional cultures the bride’s side has to give a big enough gift to the groom’s family to entice them to take away the daughter, implying that females are useless parasitic beings. Indeed, in those (non-Chinese) cultures brides are sometimes killed in retaliation for their families not having sent sufficient dowry. In contrast, in Chinese tradition it is the groom’s side that has to give a big enough gift to the bride’s family to entice them to give away the daughter, affirming that females are valued productive beings. Similarly, in Western culture even today, the bride’s side has to pay for the costs of the wedding and the reception, because, supposedly, by taking the bride in, the groom’s side has “assumed the burden of supporting the bride”, again implying that women are useless and parasitic. In contrast, in traditional Chinese culture, it is the groom’s side that has to pay for the costs of the wedding and reception, because the groom’s side has gotten the bride, implying that women are valuable and productive. While in some traditional cultures the wife’s parents defer to the son-in-law since he has “done them a great favor by taking their daughter off their hands,” in traditional China the son-in-law defers to his parents-in-law since they have done him a great favor by giving him their daughter. In fact the traditional Chinese ideal of the relationship between husband and wife is that of deep mutual respect and courtesy, where the couple lift their trays all the way up to their eyebrows to salute each other before eating (舉案齊眉 *ju an qi mei*). In Imperial China it is considered a rhetorical question to ask, “Who doesn’t have a husband-and-wife relationship, where they are as guests and friends (誰無夫婦，如賓如友 *shui wu fu fu, ru bin ru you*)?”³ No, women are not treated as scum or worthless beings in traditional China.

3. Traditional Chinese Culture Requires Repayment of Good Done for One, Even By a Woman

Also, as part of the moral code, traditional Chinese culture strongly emphasizes repayment of the good others have done for one (報恩 *bao en*). Indeed repayment of the good one has received from one’s parents (報答父母恩 *bao da fu mu en*) is considered to be the basis of civil society and the guarantee of moral and ethical conduct. People who do not repay good done for them are looked upon with contempt and labeled with the accusatory phrase “forgetting the good others have done you and renegeing on obligations” (忘恩負義 *wang en fu yi*); people who repay good with evil (恩將仇報 *en jiang chou bao*) are considered truly wicked indeed. So, for a Chinese army unit to execute a soldier who has just saved the captain, the unit and in fact the whole nation would really be unthinkable. That would be

³ From “Eulogy to the Ancient Battlefield” (「弔古戰場文」 “*diao gu zhan chang wen*”) by Li Hua (李華), written some time shortly after the Imperial Army’s defeat in Nanshao (南紹) in 752 A.D., the tenth year of the reign period *tian bao* 天寶.

particularly true in the old days of Imperial China, when the moral code and the need to repay good has had a far greater grip on the populace than now.

Is it though, one might ask, considered necessary to repay the good one has received from mere women? If one believes the depiction in this Disney movie, perhaps women are considered so inferior that the moral code of repaying good does not apply? The answer is, of course not.

Let us look at a story widely known during Imperial China days, from as early as the 1000's A.D, "Wang Kui Reneges on Guiying" ("王魁負桂英" *wang kui fu gui ying*).⁴ Here an ill and impoverished scholar, Wang Kui, marries a lowly singing courtesan, Guiying. Though she can no longer no longer work as a courtesan but can only sing after marrying because she becomes chaste, by exerting herself to the utmost she earns the means to help him. She finds doctors to restore his health, looks after all his needs so he can concentrate on studying, and finally funds his long, expensive trip to the Capital to take the Imperial Exams. After winning the supreme honor of First Imperial Laureate, however, he divorces his "low-class" wife to marry the prime minister's daughter. Overcome with grief, Guiying commits suicide.

Now how does traditional Chinese culture treat a man who reneges on the good done him by not just any woman, but by a lowly courtesan of a woman? Does traditional Chinese culture say that it's OK to forget the good done one by a woman of such "low class"? Absolutely not. Traditional Chinese culture, expressed through this traditional story, metes out stern justice to a man who has "forgotten the good others have done him and reneged on his obligations": at the behest of Guiying's ghost, the Gods take Wang Kui's soul away to the underworld for punishment.⁵

Is it not obvious what a regular woman deserves when even a very lowly woman deserves to have her good deeds for a man repaid, and when the punishment for the man reneging, though he be as exalted as the First Imperial Laureate, can be as severe as death? Yes, indeed, in traditional Chinese culture, even if the good done is by a woman, even though she be the lowliest of women, one needs to repay and must not renege.

⁴ According to *Ci Hai* (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 1346, under the entry "Wang Kui" (王魁), this story is either from the piece "Picking up Lost Things" (「摭遺」 *zhi yi*) written by Liu Fu (劉斧) during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), or is about a real person, Wang Zunmin (王俊民), who is the First Imperial Laureate (狀元 *zhuang yuan*) in the Imperial Exams of 1061 A.D., the sixth year of the Song Dynasty reign period Jia You (嘉祐).

⁵ For the text of a 1950's Cantonese Opera on this story, go to "WONG FUI and GWAE-YING - Cantonese Opera, English Translation" on this website at http://www.tsoidug.org/Literary/Opera_Wong_08_Web.pdf.

4. Traditional Chinese Culture Is Completely Against the Kind of "Asian Face" that Some Westerners Write About

Now let us next examine the terrible obsession with “face” by the soldiers in Mulan’s unit. According to this movie, they feel ashamed and hate her because they have been outdone in war by a mere woman. Much has been written by some Westerners about how “face” is an “Oriental” or East Asian “cultural trait.” According to such Westerners, this “face” is supposed to mean not having someone point out one’s errors, and not being outperformed by someone “of inferior social rank.” Examination of a few facets of traditional Chinese culture, however, reveals it to be completely against this kind of “face.”

First, while other Asian traditional societies have had rigid hereditary classes of nobles, commoners, and even untouchable-like underclass persons, in Imperial China class is not hereditary and one can move from one class to another in life. The lowest born can be elevated to the highest social standing, and vice versa. Indeed China’s lack of immutable hereditary classes is quite unique among traditional societies. Thus there is no need in traditional China to forcibly preserve the facade of superiority for persons of higher social rank over those of lower rank, nor is there a monopoly by the higher class over certain “noble” activities such as war, study, or becoming a top official. In fact, the idea central to the American Dream has been prevalent since long ago in Imperial China: anyone can aspire to the highest position in life. Stories of poor boys make good abound.⁶ As the old Chinese saying goes, “generals and prime ministers are not genetic; young men should strengthen themselves” (將相本無種，男兒當自強 *jiang xiang ben wu zhong, nan er dang zi qiang*). It is considered not only normal but also desirable that persons of lowly origins aim for the loftiest achievements and surpass those above them. When that happens in traditional China, no “loss of face” is involved for anyone in the higher social classes.

⁶ Many of the poor boy make good stories are through the Imperial Exams: succeeding in the Imperial Exams means an automatic spot in the social elite, i.e. a post in the Civil Service. Usually economic gain follows. Prestige is very high for the Imperial Exam Laureates, the First Imperial Laureate, for example, being the only one besides the Emperor himself allowed to enter and exit the Imperial Palace and its various buildings through the central one of the three doors. Some examples of the Imperial Chinese success stories: the legendary Emperor Shun (舜) from purportedly 2233-2184 B.C., who is an ordinary peasant raised to the throne, Zhu Mai Chen (朱買臣), mentioned in *San Zi Jing* (三字經), d. 115 B.C., originally is a cowherd whose wife divorces him for his poverty, Lu Wen Shu (路溫舒), also mentioned in *San Zi Jing* (三字經), circa 70’s B.C., who is so poor when younger that he uses his straw mat to write on, Lu Meng Zheng (呂蒙正), 944-1011 A.D., who supposedly is so poor before succeeding in the Imperial Exams that the butcher barges into the kitchen to take back the meat bought on credit and the father-in-law tries to pressure Lu’s wife to divorce him, the famous patriotic general Yue Fei (岳飛), 1103-1142 A.D., who when young is so poor that he uses sand and twig to learn to write, and so on and so forth.

Second, traditional Chinese culture places great value on humility as a hallmark of the Noble Man (君子 jun zi). To be considered refined and possessed of “self cultivation” (修養 xiu yang), the Chinese Noble Man is supposed to be humble (謙虛 qian xu), to never boast of his abilities as only the ignorant and uncouth do so, and to be polite towards people of lower station than he (禮賢下士 li xian xia shi). Even if it were true that, as the Disney movie suggests, women were considered extremely inferior, it would be absolutely unconscionable for anyone, especially a Noble Man, to be hostile to a woman for having outshone her “male betters” in doing a good as great as saving the country. When the good done is so great, the proper thing for the traditional Chinese Noble Man to do would be to recognize, thank, and get all to honor the “inferior” person.

Third, the Noble Man is supposed to welcome and accept criticism, to be “afraid when (he) hears praise, and glad when (he) hears criticism” (聞譽恐，聞過欣 *wen yu kong, wen guo xin* from “Di Zi Gui”, verse 113 - 116)⁷, as criticism lets people overcome shortcomings, improve themselves and avoid mistakes. Moreover, he is supposed to be unafraid to admit and apologize for his mistakes, as in the famous apology by the renowned general Lian Po (廉頗), who strips from the waist up and carries sticks of wood on his naked back for the party he has wronged to beat him with (負荊請罪 *fu jing qing zui*).*zui*).

So, in the traditional Chinese paradigm, a proper man does not care much for “face.” The Noble Man is humble, he treats those of lower rank with courtesy, he readily recognizes and honors even social inferiors for performance surpassing his own, he welcomes criticism, and he openly acknowledges shortcomings and mistakes.

Now it is true that dignity and honor is considered important and one must not submit to malicious insults and degrading humiliations, especially from the rich and powerful, but that is spine, not “face.” Spine is completely different from some overweening, egotistical obsession with never admitting to or getting pointed out as, being wrong or being less capable than another.

Actually the real "face" that gets mentioned in traditional Chinese culture refers to the need for good conduct and refraining from acts against righteousness and morality, or else one deserves to be ashamed, one loses the respect of others, that is, one "loses face". Doing bad things bring shame, that is the real meaning of "face" in Chinese culture.

I dare not vouch for other Asian societies that have hereditary social classes, but to say that Chinese traditional culture is obsessed over the kind of “Asian face” that some Westerners gleefully write about is a myth and a fallacy. Obsession over that kind of “face” is merely

⁷ From “Di Zi Gui (Students’ Rules)” (「弟子規」) by Li Yuxiu (李毓秀), written during the 1700’s. For text with English translation see “Di Zi Gui—Chinese Text with English Transliteration and Translation” on this website at http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui_web.pdf (complicated script) or http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui_web_simp.pdf (simplified script).

an obsession of the ignorant and uncouth everywhere, including not only Asia but also the West.

5. The Disney Producers Fervently Believe in a Stereotype of Traditional Chinese Culture

This movie does not stop at the fabrication of the near execution of Mulan; it also feels compelled to fabricate the degrading group presentation of marriageable age girls to the tyrannical town matchmaker. There, the girls are so much browbeaten, dressed-up and painted pieces of meat, to be callously graded and then sold. If one looks back at the stories from traditional Imperial China itself, however, one can see that typically the matchmaker is just a trusted family friend of both the groom's and the bride's sides. Even when it is a professional go-between, the whole matter of finding a spouse is treated with the utmost dignity and courtesy. The whole picture of a evil society that routinely subjects females to crushing humiliation is a complete distortion of traditional China, yet such a picture is exactly what this movie conveys.

So why does Disney feel compelled to fabricate history and misrepresent traditional Chinese culture as a cruel, vile culture, at least when it comes to half the population, the women? Having grown up in North America during the Sixties as a person of Chinese descent, I cannot help but think of the stereotype of the evil slant-eyed "gook." This movie tries to get away with it by portraying the "gooks" as brave and loveable; it's just their culture that is so "gooky" and evil. Chinese culture is depicted as being so wicked that not only does "face" far outweigh any need to thank someone who has done the army and the nation a very great favor, but also the lives of half the population, that is, women's lives, are of no import whatsoever compared to the "face" of some insecure and vindictive men. To demonize traditional Chinese culture in this manner, is it because Disney wants to trample underfoot the self-respect of people everywhere with a Chinese heritage?

No, even though that is the effect of Disney's fabrications, I think not; I don't think Disney has any deliberate hostile intentions towards people of Chinese ethnicity. In fact I think the Disney producers believe themselves to be doing Chinese people everywhere a favor. I think this movie's Disney producers truly and honestly believe that the real face of traditional Chinese culture is vile and cruel, towards women anyway, and that by pointing this out they are helping people of Chinese ethnicity "overcome their dark and despicable side," no matter that this "dark and despicable side" is of the producers' own invention.

6. Yes, Those Are the Bad Old Days, But Traditional Chinese Culture has not been vile to Women

Of course, I am not saying that traditional Chinese society has been a paradise for women. No, all traditional societies have been hard on women, and that's partly because of the

primitive and impoverished conditions back then; those are the bad old days after all! Life then is like how life is now in the poorest of the poor countries, except that medicine, hygiene, and everyday scientific knowledge are even more backward, far, far more, and chronic ravages like tuberculosis and intestinal worms are even more widespread. Women then have been the weaker sex. They routinely die in their teens and twenties of childbirth, and so have a significantly shorter life expectancy than men. Women are routinely anemic from menstruation and pregnancy, and so often have significantly less stamina than men. By the way, we are not talking about just mild anemia here but severe chronic anemia, like rural women in present day very poor countries, whose measure of red blood sufficiency called the hemoglobin, over 12 to be considered normal nowadays in developed countries, is often 4—yet these women are working in the fields and breast feeding their babies!⁸

Discrimination against women in traditional Chinese culture? Absolutely and most definitely true, as in all other pre-modern societies including the West. But cruelty and vileness towards women? Considering their lives as nothing? Absolutely false. Even in the bad old days, with what little material possessions they have, our ancestors have developed a civil society and a moral code, which are inclusive of women. Nay, rather than deserving outright contempt and rejection, this civil society and this moral code have much that is not only still valid today but also timely and vital, and deserves our study and inheritance.

At this point some readers will exclaim: not cruel to women? What about the binding of the feet? Yes indeed, the widespread binding of the feet of adolescent girls from more affluent families during the last 250 years of Imperial China, i.e., during the Qing Dynasty, is a sad and revolting spectacle to us today, and rightly so. Yet the idea behind it back then is not deliberate cruelty: rather, it is considered a cosmetic procedure designed to attain a swaying walk, then considered beautiful, and to ensure that the daughter will never have to do manual work, including most house work, thus guaranteeing a high class status and the use of servants. Only daughters of wealthy families are able to bind their feet; families that are not wealthy cannot afford to have their daughters bind their feet. The foot-binding idea is a bit along the lines of the extraction of perfectly healthy teeth followed by two to three years of painful dental braces for teenage daughters, widespread today among more affluent North American families and certain to be also condemned by future generations for health reasons—it's a cosmetic procedure. Today we consider foot binding ugly and crippling; back then they consider it beautiful and elevating. Yes, traditional Chinese culture has been foolish and ignorant on foot binding, like on some other things; after all, those are the bad old days of backwardness and ignorance. Not only China, but also other pre-modern societies, including the West, have also lived bad old days of backwardness and ignorance. By foot binding for the affluent during China's Qing Dynasty, however, Chinese culture is not being deliberately cruel or vile towards women, nor does it consider women's lives worthless.

⁸ “Health Conditions in Bhutan,” Royal Alexandra Hospital Grand Rounds, Edmonton, Canada, approx. 1992, oral and slide presentation.

7. We Should Brush Aside the Stereotypes and Study Traditional Chinese Culture and the Chinese Intellectual Heritage

These well meaning but zealous crusaders at Disney, however, believe in an anti-woman stereotype of Chinese people and Chinese culture so strongly that they feel the historical facts widely known in China, such as Chinese culture does not demand that a woman who joins the army and performs excellent deeds be executed, are not valid because they are not “representative”, that is, they do not represent “the vileness with which Chinese culture treats women”, and therefore it is justified to make up new “facts” that are “more representative”, such as Mulan's near execution. To all fervent believers in a stereotype, even well meaning ones, facts that contradict the belief are not valid, while fabrications that support it are.

The really sad and scary thing is that the demonizing of Chinese culture by Disney’s “Mulan” has succeeded even among ethnic Chinese themselves. No outcry has come from any Chinese community; in fact, the movie has been shown in Mainland China itself to very large audiences. Ask young ethnic Chinese in North America today and most will tell you that they believe the Chinese army would execute a woman in that situation. Of course, ask them whether they believe that the U.S. army would do the same and the answer is a shocked and emphatic "of course not". Alas, so successful is Disney’s anti-Chinese propoganda, delivered through outstanding artistry, that even the Chinese themselves embrace it!

Sad, sad! Have the minds of people of Chinese ethnicity become so feeble through a century plus of ideological confusion that we can’t tell when our heritage is being demonized? Have we become so servile that a bit of display of intellectual and artistic prowess by some institution from the West like Disney, and we all passively submit to any slander against our culture and our intellectual heritage? Are we allowed only to be proud of kung fu and Chinese food, but must be ashamed of the entire Chinese intellectual tradition? I only hope that my piece here will be able to clarify matters to some people. Perhaps more will study the Chinese intellectual heritage and rise to its defense in the future. Maybe some might even further develop and improve the heritage.

Whatever you do, dear reader, don’t just take my word for it; please read for yourself the original “Ballad of Mulan” (木蘭詞 *mulan ci*), from the days of Imperial China, at the following web pages:

- http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Mulan_Ballad_Comp.pdf or http://www.tsoidug.org/Literary/Mulan_Ballad_Simp.pdf
(Chinese script with English translation and pinyin, both by me),
- <http://www.mymandarin.com/reading/mulan.htm>
(Simplified Chinese script with a voice reading),

- <http://ss24.mcu.edu.tw/~s4440482/home-e.htm> (Traditional Chinese script), or
- <http://sokamonline.com/C-Lit-Oth/MulanE.cfm> (English).

Hearing the voices from the past in their original will confirm that traditional Chinese culture is not as despicable as the one depicted in the Disney movie.

Indeed, as we brush aside the demonization stereotypes, and learn more about Chinese culture and the Chinese intellectual heritage, we will realize that there is much that is not only still valid for us today but also timely and vital. Yes, instead of harboring any contempt, we should all study, inherit and whenever possible, further develop this unique and important part of the human intellectual heritage.

(Written Jan. 24, 2007, Revised May 2008 and Dec. 2009)