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

### Re-fashioning the warrior

**Hua Mulan:**

Changing norms of sexuality in China

Louise Edwards

The continued popularity of Hua Mulan’s tale derives in part from its flexibility and its redactors’ enthusiasm to make adjustments to the description, plot and conclusion as suits their needs. As Wu Pei-Yi aptly put it, “She was, and still is, amenable to all forms of fantasizing and manipulation.” There is not one single coherent Hua Mulan narrative, but many. However, the sustained popular interest in the story over 1500 years (Hulan has been the subject of poetry, drama, opera and more recently film, television series and video games) also emerges in large part from its foregrounding of a foundational problem in China’s ever evolving social order: the governance of sexual morality between the male and female realms to enter the masculine world of war-termed and breast. In the 1964 Huangmei diao opera-film version of her story, directed by Yue Feng, Mulan resists receiving medical attention for her shoulder wound using fezbeakings like “since I was small I haven’t liked to remove my clothes”. The other soldiers comment that it is strange that a “big tough guy doesn’t like taking his clothes off.” In the end, a compromise is reached and they cut an opening in the clothing around the wound without exposing the rest of her body. Wong Hok-sing’s 1961 Cantonese Opera film version includes a similar upper arm injury, which is treated only by carefully rolling up the sleeve, but the soldiers that work on the injury rather salaciously discuss the unusual smoothness of his/her skin. In the 1999 Yang Peipei directed multi-episode television drama version, Mulan’s breasts are a constant source of difficulty for her disguise as she avoids her fellow soldiers touching her chest in multiple comic scenes of celebratory group hugs and upper body injuries.

Accompanying the shifting, disaggregat- ed, corporeal erotic is the evident anxiety produced by the dismantling of sex-segregation practices in the 20th century. Mulan allows audiences to touch upon the central problems of feminine sexual- ity and female sexual virtue; particularly the latter’s vulnerability to the dangers posed by a woman’s proximity to men. The most remarkable example of the anxiety produced by the risk of norms of virtue posed by ‘women in public’ emerges from the 1933 version directed by Bu Wancang. The film was released in the middle of the War of Resistance against Japan where “the ravaged women” routinely symbolised the ravaged nation in film, fiction and art. It commences with Mulan being surrounded by hoodlums attempting to steal the rabbits she has just caught. The sexual threat posed by the gang is as clear as the leader touches her with his arrows, moving from her lips, face, arm and eventually swatting her buttocks. The movement around her body suggesting that no part of her body was safe and every place an eroticised site. Moreover, this sexualised body is a vulnerable body. Others in the group warn her to behave because he “still hasn’t taken a wife” suggesting that he might like to “take” Mulan. To escape this threatening gang Mulan uses her wit and cunning. Later in the film, audiences are reminded of the threat posed by soldiers to women when the invading forces capture the command post and rush through carrying off the screaming and terrified women as booty.

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

The mobility of ‘the erotic’ around the body and the changing notion of the private as feminised and sexualised over the course of time reveal the importance of sexuality to the ongoing appeal of the Mulan story. She is far from the “non-sexual”, “de- feminized” woman warrior that Cai Rang argues dominates the Wuxia (Martial Arts) literary and film genres of recent years. She is a filial daughter, but within that public sphere she has also allowed genera- tions of readers and viewers to fantasise on the problems of human sexuality and female sexual virtue.

Cross-dressing and homo- hetero-sexual desire

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

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Once the revolution or war of independence is over, the struggle for a better society continues. The reintegration of guerrillas into society may result in the formation of professional defence and police institutions, and how revolutionary ideals and how revolutionary ideals are being translated into action. The reintegration of women into society has been a complex process, characterized by both progress and challenges.

The role of women in the police and military institutions, and how revolutionary ideals are being translated into action is a key issue. The situation is complex and nuanced, with both progress and challenges. For instance, in the Timor Leste police and military forces, there has been an increase in the number of women in leadership positions. However, there are still barriers to full integration and equality.

Notes
3. The full paper is a chapter in a book I am currently writing titled Women I Command.

Whispered confidences: articulating the female in the PNTL (police) and the F-FDTL (military) in Timor Leste

Jacqueline Seaman

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

It is probably no exaggeration to claim that the 35-year East Timorese war of independence against the Indonesian military would not have succeeded without active female participation. Apart from more traditional support roles, women actively participated as combatants. This was greatly facilitated by the ideology of the Falintil (armed forces for the National Liberation of Timor Leste) – the military arm of the Revolution of Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) – that all combatants were equal, regardless of gender. As the above quote demonstrates, the women, and presumably also the men, strongly believed in this.

A recently concluded research project in the Democratic Republic of East Timor, entitled "Women in the F-FDTL and PNTL: The Viewpoint of the People" was undertaken for the country’s "State of the Nation Report." Research included interviews with female (and male) personnel of the F-FDTL (Timor Leste Defence Forces) and the PNTL (Timor Leste National Police). The research project provided interesting insights into the current role of women in the police and military institutions, and how revolutionary ideals are being translated into action. The research demonstrates that women are entering more senior roles within the military and police, and are being promoted to high positions.

The post-revolutionary glass ceiling According to the official statistics, of 3,154 PNTL personnel, 581 are women. This compares advantageously to the proportion of women in the far smaller F-FDTL, with 61 women in a force of 706 personnel. In both forces, high positions have generally eluded women, excluding them from key decision-making and consequently the ability to initiate more women-friendly policies. The position of Inspector is the highest rank so far that one single female has achieved in the PNTL. While there are a few female Sub-Inspectors, the majority of women are Agents and Recruiting Agents, with the minimum recruitment criteria being completion of the SMA (High School Degree). The situation is equally bleak in the F-FDTL where only about seven women have achieved the rank of Second Sergeant. In both the police and the defence forces, the majority of women have never been promoted. This generally seems to reflect the 1975-1999 resistance era when there were never any women at the "commander" level in the "official" military ranking, even in the non-statutory forces.

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

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