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To whom it may concern:

We are writing to submit our adaptation of *Fierce and Filial*, one of the earliest Mulan novels. Although Mulan's story has inspired countless derivative works, few people have had the privilege of reading this classic piece of Chinese literature.

This novel features strong female characters, epic battles, and romantic tension. Impossibly unstable bonds are forged across enemy lines, vows are broken, and characters wrestle with the morality of warfare.

By closely following the plot and characters included in Zhang Shaoxian's novel (originally published circa 1850), this adaptation will draw the reader into a world that is filled with historical richness. In particular, readers will gain a greater appreciation for Confucian values. This is reflected in how Mulan views herself, interprets dreams, and refuses to become bitter when her superiors fail to recognize her achievements.

We appreciate this opportunity to present our work to you. Please feel free to contact us with any questions at the address or phone number shown above.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Philip Naudus and Xiao Linda Kang

PROPOSED TITLE

Fierce and Filial

ONE-SENTENCE DESCRIPTION

A retelling of the Mulan legend for adults, based on the Qing dynasty novel *Fierce and Filial* by Zhang Shaoxian.

AUDIENCE

There were 21 million Americans who were under the age of 18 when they watched Disney's *Mulan*.¹ These people are now between the ages of 27 and 40.

Half of adults within this age demographic purchase and read at least six books per year,² and 40% of adults prefer reading fantasy and historical fiction.³ Thus, the target audience consists of approximately **4 million people**.

This novel is primarily targeted toward a mass market, as the story has been embellished to engage modern readers. Serious readers are a secondary audience. The book will include an exposition on the original text in an appendix, which is best read after finishing the entire novel first.

UNIQUE ANGLES

Many elements from Disney's film adaptations—the avalanche, an enemy sorceress, and Mulan's chest wound—are attributed to Zhang Shaoxian's original masterpiece. As an adult novel, it also includes mature themes. Mulan develops nightmares after accidentally killing women and children, she is forced to betray friends, and her virginity is threatened. Upon joining the army, Mulan discovers that she must fight against her own people, who had fled into the mountains to escape the emperor's tyranny.

In the process of writing *Fierce and Filial*, the authors have developed a compelling world by interviewing professors of Chinese history and consulting numerous texts from imperial China. While many scenes have been embellished and characters have been given more convincing personalities, this adaptation strives to remain true to Zhang Shaoxian's original goal: To inspire the reader to live virtuously through conveying an entertaining and engaging story.

¹ 26 million Americans watched Disney's animated *Mulan* in theatres. In 2000, 30% of moviegoers were under the age of 20 (motionpictures.org), and 2.7 families reported watching movies at home for every one who reported going to the theater (statista.com).

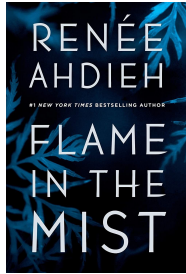
² According to data.bls.gov, half of adults born between 1975 and 1995 spend over \$77 on reading for pleasure. This is enough for six or seven books per year. Because half of adults within this same age demographic spend at least 48 hours per year reading for pleasure, the number is probably closer to six books per year.

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/195575/us-adult-preference-of-book-genres-2008/>

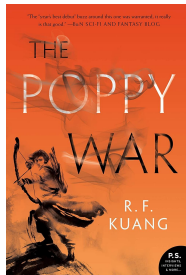


COMPETITIVE TITLES

The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan by Sherry Thomas (Tu Books, September 2019) is the most historically accurate Mulan retelling that is marketed toward adults. *Fierce and Filial* is unique because it explores the ancient Chinese worldview, especially how Mulan's sense of virtue differs from Western ideals. *Fierce and Filial* also contains darker themes, such as traumatic deaths and moral ambiguity.



Flame in the Mist by Renée Ahdieh (G.P. Putnam's Sons, May 2017) revolves around a strong female protagonist who, according to the author, was inspired by Mulan. *Flame in the Mist* features a boys-meets-girl romantic subplot; Mulan is already engaged when *Fierce and Filial* opens. While she begins as a naive girl, Mulan grows into a woman who must fight (and kill) those who threaten to steal her beloved.



The Poppy War by R.F. Kuang (Harper Voyager, May 2018) is set in a world that Kuang constructed using extensive research of both ancient and modern Chinese history. *Fierce and Filial* is similar in the depth of research that has been undertaken. Readers of *Fierce and Filial* will learn how political and social struggles led to one of the darkest eras in Chinese history. Understanding this dog-eat-dog world makes a tale of sacrifice even more outstanding.

SYNOPSIS

Seventeen-year-old Hua Mulan is beautiful, talented, and engaged to be married to Qingyun, a brilliant scholar with a bright future. But when her elderly father is drafted, she decides to take his place. Upon setting out to enlist, she meets Mo Qianzhu, a grandfather figure full of Confucian wisdom, and He Rugu, a brokenhearted man who refuses to submit to the Xianbei regime that rules over what used to be China.

Mulan impersonates her father, a decorated veteran. The supreme commander is impressed with her supposed military experience and gives her authority over five thousand men. She finds herself to be overwhelmed, and must learn to grow to fill her position.

Due to ethnic tensions, Han Chinese and Xianbei men camp separately. When the Xianbei camp is attacked, Mulan rescues them, but the vanguard refuses to give her credit. She is repeatedly overlooked for promotion. With Qianzhu's help, Mulan learns how to control her emotions.

Eager to end the war before next winter, the emperor orders a suicide mission. When Mulan is captured, the enemy seeks to sway her allegiance by forcing her (whom they don't realize is a woman) to marry the rebel princess, Wanhua. When Mulan refuses to consummate the marriage,

the princess grows suspicious. Mulan shares her story, and Wanhua agrees to betray her own family conditions that Mulan did not intend to agree to.

Together, the two women devise a method to defeat the enemy from within. Mulan battles a sorceress, and is severely injured. The army advances without her, as she will not fully recover for the next three months.

The emperor has lost his patience. Suspecting mismanagement, he orders that an imperial examination be conducted to appoint an inspector general who can bring the expedition to a speedy conclusion. Wang Qingyun (Mulan's ex-fiancé) places first.

Qingyun's presence proves to be a constant distraction for Mulan, as she is sure that he is already married. Desperate to regain her composure, she takes a small group and relocates a day's journey away from the main camp. Meanwhile, Qingyun attempts to induce a landslide. The last enemy leader flees down the backside of the mountain, but Mulan captures him.

The army returns in triumph. Upon seeing that both Chinese and Xianbei men respect Mulan, the emperor offers her a prominent position. She declines and requests to be sent home.

Wanhua disrupts Mulan's wedding with three hundred maiden soldiers. Mulan finally realizes that Princess Wanhua had planned an elaborate scheme from the very beginning to steal Qingyun and the power he holds. After an intense battle, Mulan kills Wanhua.

It will take many years for Mulan to overcome the trauma she has experienced over the past twelve years. Still, she and Qingyun look forward to a future together.

This novel is approximately 90,000 words.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

As a biracial Asian-American, Philip Naudus has grown up around an amalgamation of cultures. He has studied over a dozen versions of the legend of Mulan written during the Tang, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

Xiao Linda Kang was born in China. She has loved reading ever since she was very young, and learning English opened a whole new world of books to her. She received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania.

Philip and Linda live in Taipei with their two children.

AUTHOR PROMOTION

The author will work closely with the publisher to actively promote *Fierce and Filial*. The author operates the website www.mulanbook.com. Dr. Louise Edwards (author of *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*) endorses this website as "an amazing resource."

This website ranks #4 in the Google search "Hua Mulan" and #1 for "Ballad of Mulan."

SUGGESTED BLURB

Upon dressing as a man and joining the army, Mulan is quickly promoted beyond her capabilities. She is captured, and the enemy seeks to make peace by forcing her to marry their princess.

The night of the wedding arrives. If her secret is uncovered, she will be exposed to the rebel leader, who forcefully sleeps with any woman he pleases. The princess leads Mulan into the nuptial chamber, and vows to show blood on the sheets tomorrow morning.

Although the two of them are now alone, Mulan can hear thousands of soldiers outside the chamber moving into position. Her thoughts drift back to her betrothed. She should have at least said goodbye before joining the army.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

The first three chapters begin on the next page.

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Chapter 1 - The Proclamation

The Xianbei people... invade our frontiers so frequently that hardly a year goes by in peace, and it is only when the trading season arrives that they come forward in submission. But in so doing, they are only bent on gaining precious Chinese goods; it is not because they respect Chinese power or are grateful for Chinese generosity. As soon as they obtain all they possibly can [from trade], they turn in their tracks to start wreaking damage.

—Ying Shao, *Book of Later Han*, 185 AD (Translation by Wontack Hong)

“Watch out! Your attacker is advancing to your left!”

Mulan threw the end of her staff forward, then made a false retreat as she kicked the end of her staff into the air.

“Follow this pattern. Use your other hand to control the speed.”

Father grabbed Mulan’s staff and guided it.

“Wonderful! Make sure to keep a rooted stance. Straighten your back. That’s right! Now, let’s try the routine again.”

Mulan crouched down and tried to imagine that she was being attacked by soldiers on every side.

“Too low! You don’t want to hit the ground and lose momentum. Scoop up from underneath. That’s right! Tighten your forearms and loosen your shoulders. Excellent! Faster! More powerful! Ready? Now, lunge!”

Mulan leapt forward, her staff swinging from side to side so quickly that it practically encompassed her entire body. She slammed the staff against the ground.

“It’s beautiful, but your movements were too elaborate. An attack like that is easily thwarted. Let’s try it again. Force your opponent to block, then hook around and throw his staff to the ground.”

Mulan retreated a few paces and bowed.

“Ready? Begin!”

Mulan made tight sweeping motions with her staff, being careful to maintain control as it flew through the air. At Father’s signal, she slammed her staff against a tree and reversed directions.

“You’ve just disarmed your opponent. Fatal blow to the head! Fatal blow—”

“Hua Hu! What are you doing to our daughter?” Mother burst into the courtyard and rushed to snatch the staff away from Mulan.

Father looked up and smiled. “Ever since I injured my back, I haven’t been able to spar with her anymore. So I figured we’d just—”

“No spear fighting! Not even against an imaginary opponent!”

“This isn’t a spear. It’s a—”

“I don’t care! Are you so determined to make our daughter into a worthless woman? Qingyun is the only scholar in all of Hebei brilliant enough to exempt himself from the successive drafts, and Mulan is about to become one of the few women privileged enough to have a husband. Even though she is— are you listening to me?”

Father bowed to Mulan as he snatched the staff from her hands. “I’m sorry young lady, but your days of staff fighting have come to an end.”

As he shuffled back into the house, he turned and winked. Mulan hurried around the house to the rear courtyard.

Although she was grateful that Father was willing to coach her, Mulan missed the days when she could fight against a real person. Even Qingyun refused to continue sparring ever since she dislocated his shoulder. Of course, she didn’t blame him. She knew that he didn’t enjoy being bedridden for nearly two weeks, especially since everyone knew that the injury had been inflicted by a woman—his betrothed, no less.

A gate creaked.

Mulan dashed forward and helped her elderly father across the courtyard. Father’s family passed through a long line of renowned military and martial arts practitioners. Although he was a decorated officer before retiring, his strength was now failing.

“Mulan, there’s something I must discuss with you. Let’s sit in our usual place.”

Mulan supported her father as he shuffled over toward a pair of tree stumps. She helped lower him onto the larger one, then assumed her place by his side.

“My dear child, the Han Chinese people have endured pain and suffering for as many generations as the stars can remember. I rejoice with the knowledge that heaven itself has chosen to smile upon you.”

Many years ago, Qingyun had discovered an ancient scroll. It described how the once-great Chinese empire had fallen, and how the Xianbei had risen to power. Mulan couldn't remember much of what was written, as she had only read it once before Qingyun memorized its contents and then destroyed it in a fire. Nevertheless, the scroll had given her a newfound hope. China was more than a myth. Could it be restored someday?

“Father, I know that it is difficult to believe, but the Chinese empire used to—”

“We only refer to Northern Wei as *China* because it is our home.” Father's voice was filled with resignation. “But that is not what I wish to discuss. You are the most blessed of all the Chinese people under heaven, and I'm so proud of the woman you have become. However, your mother fears that you are becoming a woman of action, and I am unsure that Qingyun will always be so fond of your strength and independence.”

Mulan frowned. Now that she was seventeen years old, she was expected to develop skills that would increase her worth as a woman. Perhaps her pursuit of unladylike activities should come to an end. “Father, must I give up staff fighting?”

Father shook his head. “You are so talented. It would be a shame if you quit. And your skill with bow and arrow is truly remarkable. However, even married women must strive to maintain their worth. Your mother does not think that Qingyun truly values you unconditionally, and this time I'm inclined to believe her.”

Mulan understood that a man wouldn't hesitate to take a second wife if he feared that the first one might challenge his authority. Since she was far more proficient in martial arts than was considered acceptable for a woman, this was a legitimate concern. Had she been taking Qingyun's tolerance of her unladylike activities for granted? But surely Qingyun was different. He made her feel as if there was nothing she could ever do to lose his love.

"Father, I love Qingyun, and I know that he would never hurt me."

Tears welled up in Father's eyes. "Love is as mythical as China itself. But if it's true, knowing that you are with Qingyun will make me the happiest father under heaven. Actually, I forget— what is the date of your wedding?"

The two of them burst into laughter. Mulan fell forward into her father's arms.

"I'm going to miss being your daughter. When I return, I'll just be a guest."

"A guest! I don't suppose it would be proper for me to instruct guests how to fight with a staff. Shall we engage in one final lesson?"

Mulan jumped to her feet and bowed.

* * * * *

Mulan retreated to her bedroom chamber and let out a frustrated sigh. Why did Mother have to be so critical? Next week, nothing would matter anymore. If only Mother could leave her alone, these final days with her family could be pleasant.

Mulan tried to forget about her frustrations as she knelt on her mat and resumed a novel she had begun reading that morning. Cradling the book in her hands, she was overcome with a surge of emotions. She was going to miss Father dearly.

He had taught her so much, despite Mother's constant disapproval. While she enjoyed his lessons in staff fighting, nothing compared to the joy she obtained from reading. Books were her most rare and precious treasures. When she opened a book, she could put every concern aside and escape into another world. She devoured everything she could acquire, no matter what subject, from astronomy to warfare.

This book was about a princess. It was unique because the protagonist was a mighty warrior who defeated men stronger than herself through the use of magic.

Magic.

Mulan thought back to the lessons in *dunjia* she had learned from her grandfather. Although power should only be exercised with great virtue, using magic to defeat the most fearsome of enemies seemed like an exhilarating idea.

She was nearly a quarter of the way through the novel when a loud cry jolted her from this mystical world. Laying her book aside, she began walking softly toward the source of the sound, but ran into Xiaohuan, the family servant.

Xiaohuan was shaking. "Miss! A great disaster has come upon this house! The Emperor of Wei has decreed yet another draft, and your father's name is on the register!"

Mulan was confused. "But Father is old! He can hardly walk—how is he supposed to fight?"

Xiaohuan extended a piece of paper with both hands. Mulan sank to the floor as she read the public notice. The wording was clear—anyone who refused to comply would be killed.

“Is it certain? Has the conscription list been finalized?”

Xiaohuan shook her head.

Drawing herself up, Mulan followed Xiaohuan to the inner courtyard room, where she saw Father sitting in the corner. Mother was beside him, gasping for breath in between great sobs. Mulan entered and bowed to her parents. She tried to think of something to say. But what?

After a long pause, Father looked up with tears in his eyes. “In four days, I must depart. I fear that I will never see you again.”

Mulan could not accept this. “It would be no good for you to go! You are an aged man who experiences constant back pain, and your legs are weak. It would be suicide. No, it cannot end this way!”

Mulan tried to think of an alternative, but all that came to mind was a poem:

Deep within my heart, I have a choice to make

I have every right to sit alone and admit that there is no other way

But I must be fully devoted to my family

The greatest virtues are loyalty, devotion, and chastity

Suddenly, a thought came to her.

“Father, who came to deliver the notice?”

Father let out a deep sigh and stared at the floor. “I don’t know. Xiaohuan answered the door. I never saw the man who came.”

Mulan’s heart soared. “That means they don’t know your face! To them, you are no more than a name on a register. Someone could take your place and no one would know.”

“Are you really that stupid? Who would take my place? Hua Fang, your brother, is only five years old, and I have no sworn brothers who would sacrifice their lives on my behalf.”

A loud knocking at the front gate startled everyone. Xiaohuan went to answer it. The air was heavy.

Xiaohuan hurried to return with the recently announced conscription list. She handed it to Father with trembling hands. Mulan and Mother moved closer to read what was written.

All hope vanished as soon as they saw Hua Hu’s name.

Chapter 2 - The Plan

My sons behave themselves. [As their mother] I am not worried about them. However, my daughters... do not understand proper etiquette for women... A man's worth lies in his strength, while a woman's beauty stems from her inferiority. Hence the proverb, "The man is a wolf whose only fear is becoming weak; the woman is a rat whose only fear is becoming strong." While [a woman] learns morality through showing respect, obedience will teach her how to avoid exercising strength... A woman of influence is not to be esteemed.

—Ban Zhao, *Lessons for Women*, circa 100 AD

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. Mulan started to pace back and forth, but Father and Mother remained motionless. Finally, she grew impatient and withdrew to her room.

"I can't let it end this way!" she screamed in frustration and pounded her fists on the table. But what could she do? "A woman of influence is not to be esteemed," she recited mechanically and took a deep breath.

Growing up, Mulan had always been told that it was the men who would do something. A man of action is one of perfection. The men had always settled problems their family encountered. She just needed to trust that they would resolve this latest crisis.

Mulan took a deep breath and sat down on her bed. Her idea came floating back. If only someone could take Father's place. If only Hua Fang was older.

Was there anyone else who could come to Father's aid? Surely, Qingyun could help. She just had to find a clever way to request his assistance without insulting him with the fact that a woman had brought this to his attention.

No, he was so proud of exempting himself from the previous drafts. There was no use speaking to him about this.

Mulan made a mental list of all the men she knew who had not already been enlisted. Who might be able to do something? One by one, she imagined approaching them. In her mind, she could hear each of them offering excuses and explaining why they would be unable to help.

There was no way out. Father really was doomed.

Mulan dropped her face into her hands and began to sob. "If only I was a man! Boys can *do* things. But I... I can't..."

Suddenly, an insane thought flashed through her mind.

No, she couldn't. She wouldn't dare.

"But Father's life is at stake!" she argued with herself.

No, Father would rather die than be rescued by a woman.

She was still deep in thought when Xiaohuan entered the room. "Miss, it's the middle of the night. You should get your rest. Your father will rise early, and you will be needed to help console him."

Sleep was the last thing on her mind. Mulan let out an anxious sigh. "Do you know what is on my heart at the moment?"

Xiaohuan sat down next to her. “Miss, I have faithfully served your family for many years. Is there something you wish to discuss?”

Why was Xiaohuan suddenly acting as a friend and not like a servant? But Mulan did need to talk things through with someone. She took a deep breath. “I need to ask you a few questions, but you must not try to guess what I am about to do. Do you know of anyone who is selling a horse?”

“Miss, this village is one of the largest in the area. There are certainly horses for sale here, as well as in the four bordering villages. I could even help you find a camel if you should require it.”

Mulan nodded. “Yes, of course. But do you also know where I can buy clothes suitable for horseback riding?”

“Don’t worry, Miss. If it’s only clothing, I can take care of it.”

Every time Mulan asked a question, Xiaohuan offered an affirmative answer. “That is all,” Mulan concluded, “Goodnight.”

Xiaohuan didn’t move. “Miss, I sense that there is still something on your mind.”

Of course there was more. Much more. But did she dare reveal her plan?

Xiaohuan stood and then bowed. “Miss, you can tell me anything. I won’t tell anyone—not even your parents.”

These three days that lay before her seemed impossibly short. She needed help. She dropped her head and pondered whether she should reveal her idea.

Xiaohuan leaned close. Her eyes widened. “Miss! You are planning to take your father’s place!”

Mulan nodded, her eyes still staring at the floor.

Xiaohuan resumed her place by Mulan’s side. “Miss, I know that you are anxious. But please don’t despair—these worries will prevent you from doing what you know is right.”

Mulan breathed a sigh of relief. Xiaohuan didn’t seem to judge her, even though she was already judging herself.

Mulan lifted her head and stared into the flickering lantern. “How can I not worry? I don’t look anything like a man! If I don’t think this through, I will be humiliated. I will bring disgrace upon my family.”

“Miss, your appearance is only superficial. If you cannot mislead your comrades who will be inclined to trust you, how will you be able to deceive the enemy?”

Xiaohuan had a point. Mulan was about to enter a cruel and sadistic world. If she was to have any degree of success as a soldier, she needed to begin to master the art of deception.

Mulan grit her teeth, leaned over, and began to unbind her feet.

Xiaohuan shrieked. “Miss! What are you doing?”

“Will anyone believe I’m a man with these tiny feet? If I’m going to make my disguise believable, I must be completely committed to my new identity as a man.”

“But Miss! What if your feet swell up to three times their normal size?”

“Then, I will look exactly like a man!”

“But are you not engaged to marry Wang Qingyun? Imagine what will happen on your wedding night when he reaches down to stroke your feet—”

“You’re talking nonsense! If I am killed in battle, there will be no wedding night to speak of!”

Xiaohuan stormed out of the room. Mulan shook her head. She should have known better than to reveal her plans. Once Father heard, he would forbid her from going.

Xiaohuan returned with a pair of Father’s boots. “Miss, please try these on.”

Mulan tucked her feet deep into the boots and grimaced. She could easily fit both of her dainty feet into a single boot and still have room to spare. Xiaohuan grabbed a few scraps of cloth and stuffed them into the empty space, but it hardly made a difference. Dashing out again, she returned with several old pieces of clothing and some string. After the gaps had been filled, Xiaohuan wrapped the string around the boots and tied them to Mulan’s legs.

Mulan stood and tried to walk across the room. The boots were so heavy that she had to exert the greatest effort to lift one foot, only to let it come crashing down with a resounding thud.

“I’ll never get used to having such enormous feet.” But they both knew that she would have to.

With that, they went to the other wing of the house, which was filled with seldom-used items.

Thud, thud, thud...

Mulan's enormous boots seemed to crash against the floor with every step. She advanced as quietly as a herd of elephants walking on tiptoe. They came to the other wing of the house, where seldomly-used items were stored. She hoped that the sound wouldn't travel across the house to where everyone else was sleeping.

After searching for several minutes, they found a wooden chest. Mulan threw it open, and they began rummaging through the clothing inside.

She tried on a series of men's outfits. But of course, nothing fit.

Mulan and Xiaohuan sat down among the pile they had made and began searching for robes that could be cut to her size. Mulan sighed as she leaned against the chest. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself wearing these...

* * * * *

Mulan heard the call of a golden pheasant and knew that it was morning. She looked around. She was wearing half of a man's outfit. Xiaohuan was lying on the floor next to her. Had they fallen asleep? She couldn't recall. She shook Xiaohuan awake. There was still so much to do.

Quickly, Mulan removed the boots and changed back into her dress. The two of them went to the inner courtyard room, where Mulan bowed to greet her parents. She nodded to Xiaohuan, who retreated just as her younger brother and sister burst into the room, jumping and laughing. They were both very young and had already forgotten about the crisis that emerged yesterday.

Mulan glared. Hua Fang and Mu-nan instantly scattered away like cockroaches that had just been exposed.

Father sighed and stared blankly into the sunrise.

Mulan nodded at Xiaohuan, who retreated out of the room. She bowed again, then walked to the courtyard, where Xiaohuan was waiting with the gate already open.

Mulan lowered her voice. "Let's look at Father's old armor." After walking around the house, they entered the rear courtyard.

Mulan opened an old door and walked straight to a large chest, pulling out a flexible suit of armor and a golden helmet that was beautifully decorated with a pair of phoenix wings. Everything was as comfortable as armor could be. She would have to grow accustomed to it.

On top of a high shelf lay a sword. Mulan grabbed it and tried to swing it around, but it was too heavy. Exchanging it for a nearby spear, she found that she could maneuver this weapon with ease. Father had already taught her how to fight with a staff. Would it be difficult to learn the basics of spear fighting?

Setting the spear down, she reached for a bow and drew the string back. Although she had practiced archery ever since she was a little girl, she had always used blunt arrows. She hoped that real arrows weren't much more difficult to use.

So much of this plan relied on little more than hope.

Mulan set the bow back down. "Now, the only problem that remains is that I have never ridden a horse. I don't even know where I could practice, and I fear that it will be a difficult skill to learn."

Xiaohuan walked over to the other end of the room and pulled a saddle down from a shelf. She slung it over her shoulder and marched into the courtyard. Mulan followed.

When they had reached a large pile of wood, Xiaohuan set the saddle down and looked to Mulan for approval.

Mulan climbed into the saddle and rocked back and forth, trying to get used to the feeling.

Is this how it will feel to sit on an actual horse? Of course not. Horses move, but this is lifeless.

She looked around, trying to think of how she might simulate the feeling of a real horse beneath her. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself straddling a powerful beast. She tried to squeeze her legs together, but found that she could not command her thighs to grip the saddle.

If this were a real animal beneath me, I would surely be thrown to the ground.

Mulan let out a long sigh. "I fear that no matter how hard we work over the next three days, all the preparations we could possibly make will be woefully insufficient."

Xiaohuan bowed. "Miss, if you do not wish to take your father's place in battle, nobody would ever hold that against you. But if you must go, do not doubt the action that has already begun."

Mulan nodded. She bit her lip, as she didn't want to correct Xiaohuan for misinterpreting one of the classics. After all, her knowledge was quite impressive for how little education she had received. But still, something about Xiaohuan's words brought comfort to Mulan's heart. Maybe the action really had begun before she realized what was happening. Perhaps she had been preparing for what lay ahead long before Father received his conscription notice.

Mulan spent the rest of the day trying to guess which exercises would best strengthen the muscles she needed. After several minutes of squats, she resumed her position on the wood pile and tried to gauge whether the fatigue in her legs matched the spot where her thighs touched the saddle. It did not. The two of them discussed how she might alter her exercises. She repeated the process until, finally, she was too exhausted to continue.

By now, stars were shining brilliantly in the night sky.

Xiaohuan motioned toward the house. “Miss, it is very late. You should rest.” Mulan scooped up the saddle and marched lethargically back to the room, placing it on the shelf. When they had finished returning each item to its proper place, Xiaohuan followed Mulan to her bedroom chamber.

Mulan collapsed onto her mat and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

“Miss, if you sleep much longer, your parents will become suspicious.”

Mulan struggled to sit up. Had she slept? She looked around. It was daylight.

She was exhausted. Still, she forced herself to stand. Entering the inner courtyard room, she saw her parents sitting to the side.

Father was gazing into the distance. “Every time I see you, it is one less time I have yet to see you. With each day that passes, it is one less day I have left. In two days, I will die.”

Mulan thought about all the things that had to be done today. She didn't have time for a lengthy conversation. "Father, do not be so sure that death awaits you! Perhaps you will be saved by unlikely means."

Father's face remained expressionless. Without so much as turning to face her, he muttered, "What do you know of the outside world? The emperor is a power-hungry warlord who delights at the thought of shedding blood. I know that you believe every problem can be resolved if only a creative enough of a solution is found. But nothing can deliver me from the fate I am about to endure."

If she continued wasting time arguing, Father *would* be doomed. "Father, believe!"

Mulan rushed back to her room and knelt in front of a table. She began scribbling instructions on a piece of paper. "Xiaohuan! Take this to Wang Yi!"

Xiaohuan appeared, bowed as she accepted the paper, and departed. Mulan opened a small box and counted the silver inside. This had to be enough.

Mulan was glad that her parents had entrusted her with the family finances. Ever since they had dismissed their lazy house attendant, Mulan had agreed to manage the family's estate until a suitable replacement could be found, but she had done such an excellent job that she remained in charge of the family's silver ever since.

Mulan lowered herself to a squatting position. She tried to extend her right leg, but felt as if the world was rotating around her. She reached out to catch herself. Was she falling? She strained to focus, but her mind was so clouded that she felt as if she was in a dream. Was she about to awaken and find Father safe from all harm?

Suddenly, she felt the hard floor against her back. She groaned.

What was taking Xiaohuan so long? Or, had it only been a few minutes? Mulan looked outside. The sun was setting. Had Xiaohuan already returned?

Mulan struggled to resume the squatting position.

Focus.

“Miss, you are exhausted.”

Who said that?

A pair of hands gently helped her toward her bed.

“No, there is so much I have yet to do.”

The hands grew firm and pressed her onto the mat. Mulan crawled forward and reached to light the lamp, but found nothing.

“Miss, I will return your lamp in the morning. Until then, you must sleep.”

Mulan had never heard Xiaohuan speak in such a firm voice. Obediently, she lay back down. She heard the door to her bedroom chamber closing softly.

Now that she was alone in the dark room, a flood of thoughts washed over her. She had been so busy up to this point that she hadn’t thought about how much she would miss her family. She shuddered at the thought of being away from everyone she loved.

But she couldn’t think about herself. If she didn’t go, Father would die. His life depended on her.

But what if someone saw through her disguise? In her haste, there was no way she could construct a flawless plan. The more she thought about it, the more worried she became. Dread swept over her as she envisioned the worst that could happen. She was going to be surrounded by thousands—no, tens of thousands—of depraved men. If they discovered a virgin girl dwelling in their midst, they wouldn't hesitate to rape and kill her. Even if she returned safely with her virginity intact, she would be ridiculed as a woman who gave no thought about whether she was pleasing to a man. Even worse, she might be labeled as a woman of action.

Would Qingyun still marry her when she returned? Up until this point, Mulan felt secure that he would always understand her unladylike pursuits. But dressing as a man and going to war... was this too much?

Mulan started to weep, but remembered that Mother could hear her from the other room. She swallowed and forced her tears away with a fist.

She was about to become a soldier. It was time to begin to acting like one. She took several deep breaths... and began to cry again. What if this was all in vain and her father still died? He could fall ill and...

No, she had to stop allowing her mind to entertain such ridiculous thoughts.

The clouds are dry.

This was something boys often said when they knew that great difficulties lay ahead. It was time for her to begin acting like a man.

I must command control over my own heart. Even though it would be easier to steal the stars out of the heavens than to perpetrate the enormous fraud that I am about to commit, I am

determined to proceed. I finally know why I have read so many books about warfare and spent so much time practicing martial arts. I have been preparing for this moment since the day I was born.

As Mulan lay there, she felt as if her spirit was being drained from her body. She could only imagine the many hardships that lay before her. But none of that mattered. This was her fate. She clenched her eyes shut, but a tear still managed to escape. The world slowly faded away as she drifted into a troubled sleep.

* * * * *

When the sun rose, Mulan sat up and stretched. Her mind immediately began racing through all the things that had to be done today.

Mulan jumped out of bed. She hurried to wash and change clothes.

“Xiaohuan!”

Xiaohuan appeared in the doorway.

“Go to Wang Yi and make sure he has everything I wrote on the paper I gave you yesterday. Tell him to meet me near the rear courtyard.”

Xiaohuan bowed and hurried out of the house. Mulan marched into the inner courtyard room, where she bowed to Father.

His eyes were vacant. “After today, I only have one day left until my misery has ended.”

He almost sounded as if he longed to die. A startling realization flashed through Mulan’s mind: was Father planning to take his own life?

“Father!”

He did not answer.

She tried to think of what to say, but words evaded her. What was she supposed to do? How could she convince him to continue living?

Mulan dashed through the house and found Hua Fang. She commanded him into the inner courtyard room. “If Father so much as stands up, come tell me immediately!”

“My darling daughter!”

Mulan spun around to see Mother holding a large bowl full of steamed buns. “Where were you yesterday? Did you eat? Mulan, you are always so busy with... well, I don’t know what you always do, but look at how thin you are! Come here and sit down!”

Mother forced the entire bowl into Mulan’s hands. Obediently, Mulan sat down and picked up a bun. Had she forgotten to eat yesterday? She *was* hungry.

Xiaohuan appeared and stood in the corner. Mulan jumped up and grabbed another bun. “Zhu Yi has just arrived with grain to sell!”

Mulan followed Xiaohuan to where Wang Yi was waiting. Mulan forced a smile, doing her best not to fix her eyes on Wang Yi’s missing arm.

As they rounded the corner, Mulan's spirits soared—this was the most regal beast she had ever seen. The emperor himself couldn't own a more excellent horse. She recalled seeing a jade statue many years ago—back then, she doubted that it was possible for any real horse to be so majestic. But this elegant creature that stood before her could put the mythical *qilin* to shame.

Xiaohuan handed her a bag. Inside was a saddle, a bridle, and two changes of men's clothing that were just her size. There was even a small pair of men's boots. Although they were still too large for her feet, she would at least be able to walk without tripping. She was now fully prepared.

Mulan reached into her pouch and produced three silver ingots. She hoped with all her heart that it would be enough. Wang Yi squatted as he opened a small box and balanced it on his knee. He placed the ingots inside, then produced three small silver coins.

Mulan beamed.

Wang Yi was equally pleased. "I was beginning to think I'd never find someone willing to pay for this amazing creature."

Mulan could hardly contain herself, but she needed to continue making preparations. "Please take the horse back to your stable until tomorrow morning. In the meantime, make sure it is well fed and watered."

Mulan returned with Xiaohuan to the inner courtyard room, where Father still sat. Although Hua Fang had abandoned his post, at least Father was safe. She was about to head straight to her bedroom chamber when Hua Fang dashed into the courtyard clutching a doll. Mu-nan was chasing him.

Mulan was about to scold her brother, but realized that this was one of her last chances to play together with her siblings. Would she ever see them again? Would five-year-old Hua Fang be a grown man when she returned? Mulan scooped her brother into her arms and spun him around, tickling him until he dropped the doll. The three of them laughed and played until the sun set.

The world was about to change.

When Mulan returned to her bedroom chamber, she lit her lamp and commanded Xiaohuan to fetch the bag of necessities from Wang Yi. She closed the door to her room and spent the night making last-minute preparations. At midnight, she got dressed and packed everything into a box. After closing it, she placed the box in the center of a large blanket and tied it shut to form a sack.

Mulan knelt in front of a table, rummaged through her jewelry, and pulled out a jade bracelet. Standing, she called to Xiaohuan, who rushed into the room. “Miss? I thought you were—”

“Xiaohuan, you have proven yourself to be more than a servant.” Mulan bowed and extended the bracelet with both hands. “Please take this bracelet as a sign of my gratitude. Tomorrow, I will leave, and I don’t know whether I shall ever return. Promise that you will never forget me. Take good care of my parents.”

Xiaohuan accepted the bracelet and hurried to kowtow herself to the ground. When Mulan knelt down and placed her hands on Xiaohuan’s shoulders, Xiaohuan looked up to show a face full of tears.

Mulan fought the urge to cry. “It is going to be alright.” The two of them embraced, but Mulan pulled away. “I am now an unemotional man.”

Mulan rose and began fidgeting with her coarse robes. She didn’t know when she would wear women’s clothing again. “We both know that my departure is necessary. But if I do return, I will still be myself. I will not let the hardships of war change who I am. No matter what happens during my absence, you must serve my parents well. Take care of my sister and my brother. No matter how long I am gone, please do not give up hoping that I will be back.”

Xiaohuan nodded.

Mulan stood and began mentally reviewing everything she would need. “Please fetch the things I selected from the weapons room two days ago.”

Xiaohuan ran outside and returned with the armor, bow, arrow bag, and spear in a wheelbarrow. After Mulan put on the armor, she slung the bow and arrow bag over her shoulder. Glancing outside, she noticed that the sky was changing color.

It was time.

Father would be in the courtyard room by now. In fact, she suspected that he may have remained awake all night.

Mulan took a deep breath and struggled to steady her trembling arms.

* * * * *

Hua Hu lay in bed awake. Every time he closed his eyes, he could only see himself dressed in a suit of armor, marching to his death. When the sun finally rose, he stood and shuffled over to the inner courtyard room.

Soon after he sat on the wooden couch, he heard footsteps. The pace quickened. He braced himself and imagined that he was standing in front of an executioner. He would die with honor.

Suddenly, the footsteps stopped. In front of him stood a young soldier dressed for battle.

The young man pounded his spear into the ground. "Hua Hu! Your life has been spared. This valiant soldier has volunteered to take your place."

Chapter 3 - The Send Off

Action begins before the primary cause becomes evident, just as order must be secured before disorganization sets in. A magnificent tree was once a tiny sprout, and a pagoda that is now nine stories tall was erected by assembling many small bricks. In the same way, the journey of a thousand li is commenced with a single step.

—Lao Tzu, *Dao De Jing*, 4th century BC.

Mother rushed into the room. “My dear husband! No matter what happens in this life, you must know—”

Her voice trailed off when she saw the soldier standing before her.

Mother’s eyes widened. “Mulan! What do you think you’re doing? How dare you take Father’s departure so lightly? This is no time for playing dress-up!”

Mulan straightened herself and proudly called out in a commanding voice, “Mother, your child will fulfill my filial duty and perform an act to be remembered throughout the ages. Heroes will recite poems in the honorable memory of—”

“Enough! Have you no brain? Don’t you realize that your father’s life comes to an end today? This is no time for heroic nonsense. It’s time to shut up and let your father die in peace.”

Mulan's face flushed red with anger. "Do you really think that I care so little about Father? Do you think I would use his misery as an excuse to seek adventure? I am willing to sacrifice everything for his sake! It is my duty—"

Mother strode across the room and slapped her with a tremendous blow. Mulan was so shocked that she lost her balance and fell backward.

"You ungrateful, disrespectful, dishonorable woman of action! Yesterday, I found that your father was about to hang himself. Where were you then? You were so busy pretending to be a hero that you failed your duties as a daughter. Don't try to fool me into thinking that you truly care about his life! If his death were to give you an excuse to seek adventure, you would just as soon tie a noose around his neck!"

"Mother! You don't understand! I don't—"

"I don't understand? I gave birth to you, raised you, fed you, and clothed you. Is this how you honor your family? By throwing your life away?"

"Mother, I—"

"You whore! I can't believe that I brought you into this world, only for you to run away and join the army. And where will you sleep at night? I will not permit you to share a tent with a dozen men and disgrace our entire family by becoming the army's prostitute!"

Mulan clenched her fists together as she rose to her feet. Rage flashed in her eyes. Her heart was pounding, and her mind was racing. "Mother! How can you possibly—"

Mother burst into tears and threw herself around Mulan in a powerful embrace. Mulan staggered under her mother's weight.

“My child! I realize you’re trying to be a devoted daughter. But you must listen to me. How often have I given you faulty advice or sought my own good at your expense?”

“Mother, I’m not—”

“You do not understand that your father is an old man who longs to taste death. Although I love you both dearly, I have already resigned myself to losing your father. But why must I lose both of you?”

“I’m going to take Father’s—”

“Come, my daughter! Do not try to change what has already been fated to happen. You, my precious daughter, are worth a thousand pieces of gold. Yet, you are a fickle little girl who has not thought things through.”

“Mother! Do you really think—”

“I’m so afraid that you will wake up tomorrow and find that your heart is suddenly filled with regret, but you will be unable to return home for many years. How will I live knowing that my darling girl is trapped?”

Mulan pried herself free from Mother’s arms. “Mother, I have read ancient legends about fierce woman warriors. If they can fight and defeat men in battle, why can’t I? This is my duty to my family. I cannot remain here and watch Father lose his life when I have the power to rescue him!”

Mother wept as she renewed her embrace. “My daughter, you must understand that no person could ever be more devoted to your father than I have been. Please believe me when I say

that his time has come. How will I continue living after your father passes away, but you have not yet returned?”

Xiaohuan entered the room and bowed. “Two men are outside waiting for Hua Hu.”

Father rose from his seat and shuffled toward the door, but hesitated. “Mulan, you are betrothed to Wang Qingyun. Your filial duty is to his family. I am prepared to go. I only wish I had some final business to conduct, but I am ready to die. I suppose that death will be my legacy.”

“Father, do you really think—”

“Do *you* realize what will happen if the story of China depending on a girl begins to spread?” Father’s eyes narrowed. His voice turned condescending.

He took a few more paces toward the door. “Mulan, I admire your heart. If you show this level of devotion to your husband, you will make an excellent wife.”

“I’m not going to let you die like this! As long as I am still in my maiden home, I must serve the very parents who have made great sacrifices while raising me, nurturing me, and educating me. Until Qingyun and I are married—”

Father shook his head. “I cannot let you throw your life away on my behalf. Don’t you realize that this choice you are making will terminate your engagement? After you have shamed Qingyun and his entire family like this, no man will be willing to take you as a wife.”

Mother clutched Mulan’s robes in her fists. Her face was red with tears. “Do you really think you will bring honor to this family as an unmarried and childless woman? Don’t fool yourself into thinking you are doing this for your father’s sake. Cease your selfish ambitions!”

Mulan felt conflicted in her heart. Why did her parents have to make this so difficult? Couldn't they appreciate the sacrifice she was making?

As she tried to find the resolve to carry through with her decision, the legend of *Filial Piety that Moves Heaven and Earth* came to mind. When Shun's parents scolded and beat him incessantly, Shun remained loyal to his family. Even when his father disowned him and ordered him to depart, Shun refused to cease plowing the fields.

If I listen to my parents' words, this will show that I only seek their approval. Even if they mock my efforts—even if they never appreciate the sacrifice I am making—I will remain resolute in my decision to save Father's life.

Emboldened, Mulan reached for her dagger and held it in front of her throat. "There is no use arguing any further! If you insist on prohibiting me from fulfilling my duty, I will end my own life this very moment. I cannot bear to watch my father join the army and march to his death. If Father insists on committing suicide, so will I."

Mother lunged forward, but Mulan jumped away. "Do not touch me, Mother," Mulan pressed the dagger against her skin.

Mother froze. "Please— please don't do anything rash. But do what you must."

Mulan lowered the knife. "Mother agrees. And Father?"

Father hung his head. "I suppose we will let you go. We won't stop you. Your mother has yielded, and so will I."

Mulan forced her dagger back into its sheath. “Now that we’re all in agreement, I, Hua Mulan, wish to bid farewell to my parents.” She kowtowed. Mother knelt down and extended her hands.

“Hua Hu!” A voice came from outside the gate.

Mulan jumped to her feet and dashed outside the house. Although she could hear Mother’s footsteps behind her, she refused to take a backward glance. She sprinted across the courtyard and through the gate.

“*Ai-yo!* I’m glad to see you’re a young lad with plenty of energy. We’re going to need a few more boys like you.”

Mulan stopped to see two men standing before her. There was an elderly man—he was Father’s age—leaning against a staff, clutching it with both hands. The other man was also well advanced in years, although not nearly as old.

Mulan bowed and cupped her hands together. “Uncles, please forgive me for having kept you waiting for so long. I was busy gathering a few items for our expedition. I am Hua Hu. If I may ask, what are your honorable names?”

The younger man shrugged. “This is my comrade, Mo Qianzhu, and my name is He Rugu. But we’ll have plenty of time for introductions during our death march. Shall we begin?”

Qianzhu laughed. “In case you can’t tell, Rugu isn’t fond of the army.”

“I can’t even remember how long I’ve been a soldier. I had expected to live peacefully after my retirement, but it seems that a natural death is not in my future. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“Young lad, I can see that you also have many years of military experience.” Qianzhu motioned toward Mulan’s uniform. “How old are you?”

Mulan swallowed. She knew that her competency as a soldier would be questioned if she admitted to being only seventeen. “This year,” she replied hesitantly, “I will be twenty-one years old.”

“Hua Hu, you are so young! How did you manage to become an officer and even *retire* at such a young age?”

Mulan squinted. “I had a promising military career...”

She drew her words out while searching for a suitable explanation. She needed to pick her story carefully, as she would need to maintain this as her truth for however long she remained in the army.

“When my father suddenly fell ill, I requested a leave of absence to care for him. But now that I have received my conscription notice, I must leave my ailing father once again.”

Qianzhu nodded in approval. “I only wish I had a son to take care of me, as you have done for your father. You see, I have the severe misfortune of having only worthless daughters in my family!”

Mulan bit her lip.

Rugu rolled his eyes. “This really is a nice conversation. But please don’t forget that the sooner we head out, the sooner we can bring our misery to an end.”

Mulan lowered her sack to the ground and opened it to ensure that everything was there.

Qianzhu leaned over and peeked inside, his white beard nearly touching the tip of the sack. “You pack well! Hua Hu, I can already see how you managed to have a successful military career at such a young age.”

Mulan beamed. The hours she had spent tirelessly preparing were already beginning to pay off. “Brothers, we are about to set out on an expedition that requires us to cross a thousand mountain ranges and forge ten thousand rivers. Who, knowing that he only had one horse to carry his luggage, would dare not to pack well?”

Rugu burst into laughter. “Hua Hu, I can tell that you have been away from the battlefield for some time. Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but the emperor expects us to be slaughtered, not perform any meritorious deeds.”

Mulan made a face. “Wang Yi!”

Wang Yi led her horse around the house, then helped fasten everything to its proper place. Except for his knowing wink, he acted as if everything was normal. Mulan breathed a sigh of relief. Xiaohuan must have explained everything earlier.

mounted the horse and announced, “I’m ready! Let’s head out!”

Mother appeared from behind the courtyard walls. “My child! Do not leave so hastily!”

Mulan dismounted and kowtowed. “Mother, do not be afraid for your son’s safety. I will return in due time.”

Mother knelt down. “My beloved child, if you must go, please do not tarry once the victory has been won. If at all possible, write as often as you can. I’m sure the army has messengers. This will help to ease my aching heart.”

Mulan rose to one knee. “Your child understands my mother’s request.”

Mulan felt tears welling up in her eyes. She needed to depart before her femininity betrayed her. Rising to her feet, she turned to mount her horse once again, but felt something being thrust into her pouch.

“My child! Must you be in such a hurry? Here are a few steamed buns. Please make sure to eat enough.”

As Mulan closed her pouch, Mother desperately searched for another parting gift. “Here is a needle... and some thread. You will need this. Or, if you wish to save your torn clothing for when you return—”

“Mother!”

Mulan turned around yet again, but Mother clung to her arm.

How could she bring herself to break Mother’s heart like this? She had expected her sacrifice to bring healing to the family, not pain. Was she really doing the right thing?

“Hua Hu! What is taking so long? An old man like me requires ten thousand years to mount a horse. How is it possible that I’m in my saddle while you’re still on the ground?”

Mulan felt great sobs welling up within her chest. She had to go. Now.

The clouds are dry.

“We’re heading out! You’ll catch up.”

Mulan wrenched her arm away, darted toward her horse, and threw herself into the saddle. At her signal, Wang Yi began leading the horse forward.

“Don’t leave me!” Mother wailed, “How can I bear to lose you? Your father is an aged man, and is already at the brink of death. But if you run away from me like this, I will die from heartbreak. I need you in my arms! My treasure, my precious darling, my—”

“Mother! Don’t say that!”

Mulan wrestled her leg away from Mother’s grasp and grabbed the reins. Originally, she had asked Wang Yi to lead the horse, but she needed to get away from Mother.

When she had caught up with Rugu and Qianzhu, Mulan glanced over her shoulder to see Mother weeping on the ground. Why didn’t she feel better about what she was doing?

Rugu motioned for Mulan to draw near, but she pretended not to notice. It would be best to avoid any unnecessary questions for now.

* * * * *

Mulan’s mother lay weeping on the ground. Her daughter was gone.

Dejected, she rose to her feet and trudged back to the house.

When she entered the inner courtyard room, she saw Hua Hu sitting there. His face was expressionless. It was as if he did not care.

She walked straight to her bedroom chamber and lay down. She wanted to cry, but her eyes had run dry.

A tender hand touched her shoulder.

“Don’t try to comfort me! This is all your fault, teaching her how to fight and filling her head with stories! All I want right now is to hold my precious little girl in my arms, but that is impossible. I am a widow bereaved of my children! My daughter has left, and you will be the next to kill yourself!”

Hua Hu let out a long sigh. “It is on my account that our daughter has left us. Yet, her going was her out of her own desire to be filial.”

“You idiot! She is filial, and you are selfish! My one regret is that I stopped you from hanging yourself. I should have tied the noose myself. That way, I would at least still have my daughter!”

Xiaohuan entered and bowed. “Wang Qingyun is in the courtyard. He says that he is here to wish Hua Hu well on the day of your departure.”

Mulan’s mother sat up and looked at her husband accusingly. “I’d like to see you explain the disappearance of his betrothed.”