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**Farewell, my faithful daughter:**

*chinese myths of women from the past to the present*

*"The bravest girl in China puts away the perfumed comb.  
To repay her father's kindness she will ride away from home."  
- The Song of Fa Mu Lan (Chin, 10)*

Since the "Song of Fa Mu Lan" was first sung in Ancient China, women have been a large part of Chinese folklore and cultural heritage. Fa Mu Lan was not unique because she was a warrior; the Chinese army had thousands of warriors. Fa Mu Lan was unique because she was a woman warrior. By taking her father's place, she became a positive feminine image. From the legend of Fa Mu Lan to the modern novel *The Woman Warrior* and the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* we can see how the feminist qualities of the woman warrior are developed by myth. Through these ancient and modern myths, society's values are defined.

In ancient times, Chinese society was extremely anti-woman. The Chinese system of arranged marriage greatly devalued women. Under the system, women were married off and the family has to provide a dowry. This meant that not

only did the family lose a worker; they also had to pay to lose one. In addition, the daughter belongs to the new family and will be unable to support her parents in their old age. Because of this system, women in China were regarded as no more than second-class citizens and were treated like slaves. There was also a trend of poor families aborting their female daughters, rather than have to go through the cost and trouble of marrying them off. As Kingston shows in her story "No-Name Woman", her aunt drowned her child, not only because it was illegitimate, but also because it was a girl. As she wrote, "[i]t was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys." (Kingston, 15) This unfortunate situation was very real in Ancient China.

Unlike the harshness of reality, the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* presents a society that is a mixture of feminist and anti-feminist images. Lien, Michele Yu's character in the film, owns a convoy business and is respected both as a businesswoman and as a warrior. By having Lien accepted in not just business, but as a warrior, the filmmakers are sending a very feminist message. However, the film's message is a mixed one, the ancient school of Wudan refuses to teach Jade Fox and the master of Wudan uses her only as a whore. Jade turns the

tables on him however, by poisoning him and showing that women should be treated equally. Although she expresses her desire for equality through murder and treachery, it is the only way that she can express her disdain at being trapped in a hopelessly unequal society. Jen Yu, played by Ziyi Zhang is Jade's apprentice. She is trapped in an arranged marriage, another construct of the ancient patriarchal society. However, as a true "woman warrior", she refuses to accept this. Jen runs away from home and has an affair with a man she meets in the desert. Jen also receives training from Jade Fox and by studying the books of Wudan, she becomes a great warrior. To have such a powerful woman warrior is a very feminist image. The roots for this warrior are clearly the song of Fa Mu Lan. Like Mu Lan, Jen becomes a warrior and goes out on her own to prove her strength. Jen's feminine strength is shown to be great as she beats fellow woman warrior Lien and challenges Li Wu Bai. When she fights Li, she is shown to be close to his power, but seems to lack the extra training that would make them true equals. Li offers to train Jen and teach her the ways of Wudan. Jen refuses training from Li Wu Bai, presumably because Li is a man. While this is a bold move on Jen's part, it can only be interpreted as foolish. Li is a great master, and Jen could become an even greater

warrior if she were less arrogant and submitted to his training.

The society of *Crouching Tiger* is the antithesis of Kingston's society in *The Woman Warrior*. In the film, Jen has support from Jade Fox and Lien. She is not a lone woman warrior, but one of three. In Kingston's book, her hero finds that she is all alone and that no one supports her. She is forced to be a woman warrior alone, she even says in the book that her only wish is that she were "loved enough to be supported." (Kingston, 48) Her task is truly a monumental one and an expression of Kingston's feminist wishes for Chinese and American society.

Kingston projects her wishes into her story "White Tigers". Kingston has used fiction to transform the legend of Fa Mu Lan from a mildly feminist story to a completely feminist one. In Kingston's version, Fa Mu Lan is taken from her parents by a male and a female teacher. She is trained to be a warrior and makes sacrifices so that later she can project her village. She is told by the old woman that she "can avenge [her] village... recapture the harvests the thieves have taken... [and] be remembered by the Han people for [her] dutifulness." (Kingston, 23) After her training, Fa Mu Lan truly becomes a great warrior and marshals a victorious army on the field. However, by

gaining a strong masculine side, she does not lose her femininity. She becomes pregnant and yet continues to lead her troops. When it is time to give birth, she seems to pause briefly off the battlefield, have her child, put it in a sling under her armor and return to the fight. In addition, she is not dominated by her husband; her husband is subservient to her. After she has the baby, she sends him back to the family with the child. She continues to fight.

Kingston also usurped ideas from other Chinese legends. The idea of a hero with revenge oaths carved on their back is typically a male legend. However, Kingston uses it perfectly to suit her ultimate female hero. As she writes, because of the "words carved into [her] back and how they were fulfilled... the villagers will make a legend about [her] perfect filiality." (Kingston, 45) She honors both her parents and her village and earns a homecoming celebration as her reward. When she returns home, her family will "sacrifice a pig to the gods". (Kingston, 45) The celebration shown here is incredibly different from the reception given to Kingston's Aunt, the "No-Name Woman" or the kind that would have been given to Jen in *Crouching Tiger*. Kingston's vision is clearly an idealized version of Chinese society. Kingston's work seems filled with hope

for the future of women, both in China and in America. Unfortunately, great hopes rarely come true in reality.

In reality, the communist party is editing Chinese myths and using them as propaganda. This fact becomes very clear when after reading their new versions of ancient myths, one realizes that "members of the lower class are always given positive traits; women are always depicted as heroines." (Eberhard, 13) A fascinating example of the "new" Chinese myths comes from *Women in Chinese Folklore*, a book that was published in China under communist rule. The story "River God's Wife" is interrupted in a very communist fashion, showing the villagers and their religion to be silly because they are sacrificing women to the river god. (Women, 3) In the end, the people are saved by science and they learned how to build an irrigation system that would keep the river under control. (Women, 3) The scientist who saves them is to be remembered "for his outstanding contributions to people's agricultural livelihood". (Women, 3) Another story entitled "Seeking her Husband at the Great Wall" has been interpreted by the communists to show that the Emperor Shiu Huang is a "villain" for separating the two lovers and that he is a "representative of the ruling class... [and] is [to be] condemned for imposing corvee and other forms of oppression on the populace."

(Women, 3). The story "The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid" has also been interpreted to show that the goddess is "unreasonable" for separating the two lovers. (Women, 4) Reality can obviously be shaped by myth. The communist reinterpretation of myth will help them to reshape their reality. While their interpretation is obviously feminist, it lacks the optimism of Kingston's vision.

*"The legend of Fa Mu Lan whose bravery saved her nation is loved by the Chinese people and retold each generation."*

- *The Song of Fa Mu Lan (Chin, 30)*

Women are very important in both Chinese myths and in the future of China. How they are treated in myths is an important indicator of how they will be treated in reality. It seems that things are definitely improving for women in China and hopefully their future role in Chinese society will be a positive one. By examining *The Woman Warrior* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* it is clear that feminist qualities can be expressed and strengthened in reality by myths. Myths are very important in shaping society's views of women, and only through positive images of women in myths, can positive images of women be created in reality.