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China's Women

Lady Fu Hao



妇好

Warriors

by Patrick Wertmann

Records tell of hundreds of wars and uprisings during China's more than 5,000-year-long history. Typically, however, the focus is on the male warriors when it comes to military campaigns and legendary battles. Yet, if we look more closely at the records, we realize that women have also fought on the battlefield since at least the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 B.C.E.). Let's look at four ancient female warriors whose heroic actions, unwavering courage, and superhuman strength have made them legendary.

Lady Fu Hao

In 1976, archaeologists made a sensational discovery at the site of the ancient Shang dynasty capital city of Yin (present-day Anyang in Henan province). What they found was the untouched tomb of Lady Fu Hao.

Fu Hao was one of the 60 wives of Wu Ding, the 22nd king of the Shang dynasty, who ruled from 1250 to 1192 B.C.E. We know Fu Hao's name from inscriptions on oracle bones (see page 22) and bronze vessels placed inside her grave. The markings on the bones also tell us that Fu Hao was the most powerful military general of her time, leading 13,000 soldiers against foreign invaders.

Apart from the remains of 16 human sacrifices (most likely prisoners of war and subordinates killed to accompany her to the next world), the archaeologists identified 2,000 burial objects. Many of these were weapons. Finding such artifacts in the tomb

of a woman is very unusual, but they clearly illustrate her high military standing.

When Fu Hao died in 1200 B.C.E., she was honored with a tomb and an ancestral shrine (above) in the royal cemetery. If you take a trip to Anyang today, visit the site for an idea of what the archaeologists discovered (photo below) more than 40 years ago.

Fu Hao's tomb: Her remains are in the niche at left top. Among the other finds were human skeletal remains around the perimeter.



Princess Pingyang

Almost 1,800 years after Fu Hao's death, China saw the birth of another female heroine—Pingyang, the third daughter of Li Yuan. After the Sui dynasty fell in 618 C.E., China was in turmoil. Li Yuan, a provincial governor at the time, decided to act. His plan was to overthrow the Sui. While he was on his way to the capital, officials heard of his plot and ordered his arrest and that of his entire family. All went as planned, except that Pingyang escaped.

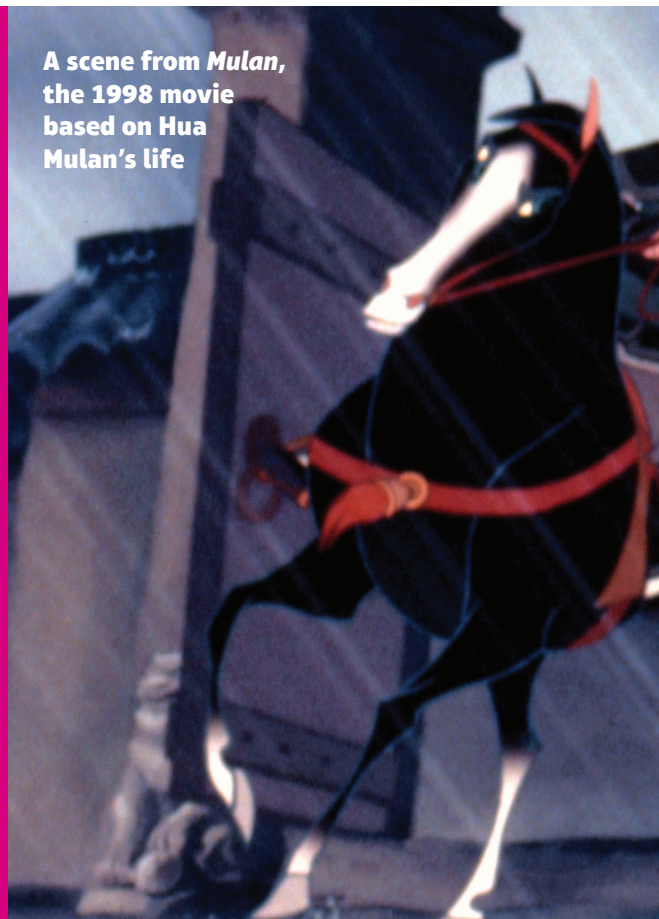
Pingyang then sold her land and distributed her wealth among the people, who thanked her with their loyalty. But Pingyang did not remain idle. Rather, she gathered an army of around 70,000 men. It soon became known as the "Army of the Lady." Then, in a series of battles, she took control of the capital and forced the Sui emperor to yield the throne to her father. Li Yuan became Emperor Gaozu, founder of the Tang dynasty. Thus, his daughter, now Princess Pingyang, played a major role in her father's success and in crushing the Sui forces.

When Pingyang died in 623, Gaozu ordered a grand military funeral that included a band, despite strong objections from the Ministry of Rites. Gaozu justified his decision by saying, "The Princess beat the drums and rose in righteous rebellion to help me establish a dynasty. How can she be treated as an ordinary woman?" According to the records, this is the only time in Chinese history that a woman has been granted a military funeral.

Princess Pingyang—check out her hair done in what is known as the "clamshell bun" style.



A scene from *Mulan*, the 1998 movie based on Hua Mulan's life



Mu Guiying

Legendary Lady Mu Guiying from the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126 C.E.) was immortalized for being the only one to defeat the Heavenly Gate Formation of the Liao dynasty. And she did so at the very young age of 19. Her actions had such a strong impact on the Liao that they never regained their former power.



Hua Mulan

Unlike the two female warriors above, whom we know from historical accounts, the tale of Hua Mulan is based on a legend believed to have taken place during the Northern Wei dynasty (386-557 C.E.). Thanks to the animated movie about her, she is now known throughout the world.

When one male from each family was called to serve in the army and defend the country from foreign invaders, Mulan disguised herself as a boy and took her old father's place. According to the tale, she was beautiful, exceptionally strong, and skilled with the sword. She endured the hardships of war for 12 years. After she had served with distinction, she turned down an official position and returned home to her family. Her comrades could not believe their eyes when they saw Mulan in a dress. Only then did they realize that they had fought next to a woman.

Hua Mulan stands tall in a garden in Singapore.



Mu Guiying prepares to lead her followers.

Guiying was the wife of Yang Zongbao, whose job was to help guard the borders of the empire. During the reign of Emperor Renzong, this area was constantly at war, often with the Western Xia people to the north. Zongbao was the last remaining soldier in his clan, when he walked into a trap set by an enemy and was killed. Laying aside her sorrow, Guiying gathered all the widows in her family with the

goal of defeating the Western Xia.

For Mu Guiying and her followers, their efforts ended tragically. As they made their way through the Tiger and Wolf Canyon, they were all killed in a surprise attack. According to legend, the spirit of the mountain was so touched by this tragedy that tears in the form of rocks rolled down the cliff.