

MIT4 Panel: "Asian Warrior Womanhood in Storytelling."

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Interrogating the Women Warrior: War, Patriotism and Family Loyalty in *Lady Warriors of the Yang Family* (2001).

The medieval Chinese are known to be heavily patriarchal, but even such a culture produced many formidable women warriors...Daughters of prominent military families trained in the martial arts. Wives of generals were often chosen for their battle skills. The Yang family of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) was one such military family. When the men were decimated on various military assignments, their wives, mothers, sisters and even maidservants took their places on the battlefield. ("Warriors: Asian women in Asian society")

"No group of women in Chinese history has commanded so much prestige and respect as the ladies of the Yang family. They are revered as great patriots who were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of their country" (Lu Yanguang, 100 Celebrated Chinese Women, 149).

The genesis of this paper lies in a 40-part retelling of one of the more enduring woman warrior stories of historical China. When I saw this particular 2001 TV series which loosely translates into *Lady Warriors of the Yang Family*, I was working on my dissertation involving Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior and hence the iconic figure of Fa Mu Lan. Contrary to Mulan's concealment of gender in battle, here was a family of woman warriors from some ten centuries ago, none of whom had to compromise their true biological identity by cross-dressing or, according to Judith Lorber's definition, turning "transvestite" (Richardson et al [eds.] 42). What also intrigued me about this series was the fact that it was the first filmed series by Mediaworks, a new media company in Singapore, hoping to compete with a publicly

endorsed monopoly Mediacorp TV Singapore Pte Ltd. In essence, it was a battle-cry of sorts for healthier competition in the media.¹

In this paper, I look at the trope of the woman warrior as depicted particularly in the Singapore-Taiwan-China joint production of *Lady Warriors of the Yang Family* (2001). A modern re-interpretation of a tale of patriotism and family loyalty, the serial's multi-dimensional treatment of the woman warrior figure is an exercise in interrogating the popular but often controversial issue of women in positions of power. I argue that by scrutinizing the construction of the Yang Woman Warriors' stories up to this particular enactment, it is possible to see how the myth effectively champions the transformational role of women warriors and its relevance in an age of moral ambivalence and socio-political transition.

Let me first give you a brief history of the Yang Family. Their story is recorded in the popular novel Stories of the Yang Family Generals (Lu 147) – but much of that is fiction. As best I can reconstruct, historically, there is evidence of a famous Song Dynasty general called Yang Ye. There are in fact surviving temples² dedicated to his family. Yang Ye married a capable wife, She Caihua who, as Lady of Xiliang, defeated him twice in battle before her marriage proposal to him was accepted (Lu 147). As the patriarch of a family of generals (the exact number of his offspring range from 3 to 22), Yang Ye and many of his sons died in active service, leaving a huge gap in the Song army desperately in need of experienced generals.³ Into this breach stepped several of the widows and two daughters of the house who took the places of the dead men. They were led by the Sixth Son, Yang Yanzhao, reputedly the best known of Yang Ye's sons. Historically, the Sixth Son's own son Mengguang upheld the Yang family's fame for a

third generation. However, in popular folklore, tradition introduces another generation into the picture, placing Yang Mengguang as the grandson rather than son of the Sixth Son, with a fictional character Yang Zongbao in between as the bridging male.⁴ It has been suggested that this insertion was introduced purely as a means to legitimately incorporate the legendary figure of female general Mu Guiying⁵ into the Yang Family without offending the increasingly patriarchal society and the “male dominate social consensus” that emerged after the Song Dynasty (Koolasuchus).

Possibly because the Song Dynasty was militarily weak when its other national aspects (economy, culture) were growing strong, both the imperial court⁶ and the harassed populace (many who moved south to avoid war, eventually the Southern Song dynasty emerged due to foreign incursions) found comfort in lionizing in popular folklore patriotic military figures who gave their all in defense of the homeland. As the dynasties unfolded, magical elements were added as were fictional scenarios.⁷ The increasing emphasis on the women as warriors and upholders of the family name possibly developed in response to the increasing confines laid upon womanly conduct/behavior over the centuries.

During the early 1960s, when Mao Zedong with his communist ideals made way for greater gender equality in the workforce, the Beijing Opera took as source the popular folk story relating to the Yang Family Warriors, namely “The Twelve Widows Battle the West” (“Shi Er Gua Fu Zhen Xi”) and the “yang ju” derived tale of “A Grand Marshal at a Hundred-Years-Old” to create their own show “The Lady Warriors of the Yang Family” – which has become one of the signal features of Beijing Opera performances,⁸ proving to be popular within China and also to audiences abroad.⁹ Apparently the

perennial theme of upholding patriotism and the promotion of a ‘newer’ image of women as movers and shakers of the world is universally appealing.¹⁰

The story of the males in the Yang Family is relatively conventional – a mixture of loyalty/patriotism and the upholding of patriarchal and nationalistic values; unto the point of sacrificing one’s life on the altar of the state. The historical thread for the widows of the family is less prominently tabulated in official records, but its fictional discourse is much richer. As Victoria Cass writes, “Female warriors are a staple of popular texts and popular iconography [who] inform popular constructions of the feminine” (80). The context for the various incarnations of these “dangerous women” as Cass terms the woman warriors (xii) is twofold: “the universals of myth and religion, and the verities of the cultural landscape” (xii). The woman warrior “threatened disorder” (Cass 2) and was often constructed as a solitary figure outside of the law. Thus the Yang Women Warriors are unusual in that they are a community of women warriors who serve together to uphold civil order. Here things become more complicated – the women’s stories supposedly celebrate the upholding of patriarchal values by the women who married into the family. Yet the subversive elements present in the various individual women’s tales as they have evolved through the centuries (especially as filmed recently) highlight the merits of a closer study of these works. As Cass surmises in her work on Ming women warriors, “In addition to their superhero-like powers, they also had a kind of literary superpower; the power to replicate;” each beginning “as a single episode” before “multiplying into many, increasing again by combining with other legends, forming and reforming until they become folk epics” (Cass 81).

It is in this “*in-between*” literary space that Geoff Bennington writes of as the arena where the personal and the political coalesce and collide, where identity politics may be written (Bhabha [ed.] 4), that the Yang Warrior Women negotiate as widows, crossing from the Confucian-allocated woman’s quarters of the domestic into the traditional male-dominant public sphere. It is in this volatile domain where they are at the forefront of change. To gain a deeper understanding of the long-standing popularity of the story and its sustained relevance, a brief tour of the status of women during the Song is particularly helpful. Unlike conventional stereotypes of the model ancient Chinese woman confined by Confucian morality and strictures such as foot-binding, a cultural practice which was introduced towards the end of the Song Dynasty, the status of the Song woman was an ambiguous one.¹¹ The Confucian ideal teaching male supremacy and female subservience was upheld as the standard for women to strive towards. However, even within Confucianism, there was adequate space for the Yang women to feel the conflict of their roles as women. For instance, the guiding principle of female subservience to males is negated by the Confucian obeisance to age: where the notion of “mother right” (Chung, 77) takes precedence over gender.¹² Hence Lady She as matriarch holds sway over her surviving son and the entire household. Also, Confucianism was mitigated by Taoism which teaches the superiority of the yin/female element, and Buddhism which leans toward equality of the sexes. “The existence of these different views allowed for tolerance of a diversity of roles for Chinese women” (Chung, “Women, Politics, and Society” Palace 85)¹³ and consequently, the “proliferation of conflicting female stereotypes,” most often seen in the bifurcation of womanly roles into women who threatened disorder and the gentle cultured maidenly ideal (Chung,

“Women, Politics, and Society” Palace 86). Significantly, politically in both Song and Liao dynasties, women were often openly in positions of power as regents or empresses. As Robert H. Lowie, author of Primitive Society remarks “It should be noted that the treatment of woman is one thing, her legal status another, her opportunities for public activities still another, while the character and extent of her labors belong again to a distinct category” (186).¹⁴ *Lady* (2001) and the various incarnations of the Yang women’s story is a good illustration of how the urgency of need in public service negates any official/legal issues about women in positions of authority.

Some historians of women who look at the family as “the central institution of women’s oppression” criticise historians of the family for writing in ways that obscure gender-based differences (e.g. goals, resources etc) (Ebrey, Inner 7).¹⁵ However, I believe that they neglect a point which the Yang Woman Warriors bring up: the family may also be central to a woman’s opportunity to flourish. “Men’s experience of family was marked by continuity, women’s by discontinuity” (Ebrey, Inner 8); the legal and ethical model of a Song Chinese family “being patrilineal, patricarchal, and patrilocal” (Ebrey, Inner 8). Several aspects of the Yang Family are orthodox to the traditional ideal family institution: descent is patriarchal, marriages patrilocal (Mu Guiying and mother-in-law, Princess Tsai all moved into the family space) but the authority was not placed entirely in the hands of the men – especially since so few of them remained. In fact Mu Guiying won marshal-hood over her husband and Lady She as Marshal commanded her son in battle. The latter also had a place in court, a definite role in public space invested upon her by the dragon walking stick the previous emperor bestowed.

Nonetheless, as a majority of widows, it is conceivable that the Yang women as individuals each had to contend also with the issue of remarriage which was frowned upon but not outlawed, for it represented a huge step which severed ties. “In contemporary Western ways of thinking, marriage is about acquiring a spouse... To the Chinese in the Sung, however, marriage was only in part about the joining of two spouses. It was primarily about how families perpetuate themselves through the incorporation of new members” (Ebrey, Inner 199) with childbearing being essential to the future survival what Cass in *Dangerous Women* calls the “cult of piety” (Cass 4).¹⁶ “For a woman, remarriage meant renouncing the family she had joined. It was comparable to a son abandoning his parents, not taking a new wife” (Ebrey, Inner 199). Hence “(y)oung widows who refused to remarry were widely regarded as heroic figures” (194) and “(t)he Sung government helped to publicize the virtue of refusing marriage” (195).¹⁷

The piety of a wife could “touch heaven” and a filial woman “could become a kind of Imperial talisman, serving the way Daoists or Buddhists served – as a symbol of dynastic legitimacy” (Cass 5); their “powers reflected on the greater glory of the Emperor and his line” (74). The ambivalence of family and community towards woman warriorhood, if it is unusual during a period, may be overlooked when the imperial court gave sanction to their usefulness (73). Both in the role of widowed women and in the position of military warriors, the Yang Woman Warriors are lauded by the nation; often frustrated by the policies of the court, they are never portrayed as mere puppets of imperial will but women of opinion and wit.

In her studies on Song social conditions Ebrey argues ably for how the exaltation of widowhood supports patriarchy. However the story of the Yang Women Warriors really celebrates woman warriorhood rather than widowhood; the latter being a condition invested on them due to a tragic set of events. I argue that it is the insidiousness of the message promoting the ability of women to survive on their own skills and merit that relegate the story to folklore and street dramas rather than canonical texts. Ultimately in the Yang Family, the women emerge the stronger sex.

Which brings me to one of issues which emerged to make *Lady* (2001) a compelling and relevant “modern” retelling: “genderless” values of loyalty, courage, heroism and patriotism (usually accounted to the men in official histories) are appropriated by the women here. Within the Yang Family, a gynocentric world view is offered as an alternative to the system (largely composed of patriarchal ineptitude) governing the nation. The surviving men are generally written to seem incompetent and to be the driving force of the empire’s demise – the Prime Minister and emperor, men in positions of authority, are controlled by women – the Prime Minister is a mere puppet of Empress Xiao and emperor is easily swayed by his concubine who turns out to be a Liao princess in disguise. Even the surviving men of the Yang Family prove vulnerable choosing unorthodox but ‘legitimate’ ways out in their choice lifestyles: the Fifth Son renounces worldly life and becomes a monk to atone for the sins of the country while the Fourth Son becomes consort to a Liao princess. The women are thus more admirable in the way they pick up the burdens laid down by the men and soldier on on their behalf. Ultimately the story that started off as a paean to dead male warriors has morphed into one of life with heroic female warriors upholding the state and family.

Additionally, unlike older versions of the tale, the women are no longer entirely dependent on the legacy of childbirth to contribute to the family but on other means of personal achievement. Despite Mencius' admonition that "There are three unfilial acts, the greatest of which is to be without descendants" (Chung, "Women" Palace 82), recent versions of the Yang story undermine the child-bearing responsibility of a woman's familial role. Unusually, in the 2001 version, a keystone of the Mu Guiying story – the breaking of the Heavenly Gate Formation with childbirth at the battlefield¹⁸ – is not included. It is significant however that *Lady* (2001) ends with Mu Guiying pregnant but not visibly so, mourning her husband, the sole Yang male/child of his generation. The new male heir is not in evidence yet, thus emphasizing the world of *Lady* (2001) as one largely comprised of women without men. Nonetheless, the burden of tradition and convention weighs heavy on the shoulders of these widows of a family of seven sons. That they manage to fulfill to their utmost their alternative marital responsibility of upholding their husbands' family's name and honor does not allow them to lose their culturally gendered vulnerability but especially with *Lady* (2001) they *do* emerge as equals to men to take back the Yang Family saga for their own.

As I mentioned previously, there is no need for these women to dress up as men and go incognito into battle; they enter into battle with their identities intact – though for many, it is a role undertaken on behalf of their husbands/brothers. They do take on their married identities though, except for the especial few, they are known by their husbands' birth ranking (e.g. Third Madam/Third Daughter-in-law). Yet even as they openly fly the flag of the Yang family name, the various female marshals (She, Yang and Mu) all hold

their own in a society of men, keeping their original maiden names as per their military rank.

The admiring lens directed at the widowed Yang Women Warriors is complicated by the ambivalent treatment of the enemy Liao queen in *Lady* (2001) who also happens to be a woman warrior. Here, the Empress of Liao (953-1009?)¹⁹ is not a mere caricature of evil. Instead, she is re-imagined as a complex figure of ambition, compassion and patriotic fervor; embodying values commonly upheld by Lady She, the matriarch of the Yang Family.

Historic records tell of Empress Xiao, the Liao queen, as an exceptionally intelligent woman who ruled where her husband (who had been mentally and physically affected by an early coup) could not and when her son was too young (11 years old). She was an enlightened woman who “either commanded the troops in person or sent troops to fight against the Northern Song” (Peterson et al, eds. 260). Whereas older filmed versions of the tale have the ladies battling the flawed ambitions of their own and the enemy’s male monarchs, two more recent productions (TVB’s *The Yang Family Saga* [1985] and *Lady* [2001]) allow the Liao empress to claim her historical role and take center stage as the enemy commander. However, these two series and ascribe to her two daughters rather than the historically accurate male heir – making the war one largely between two households made up of women. The all-out female versus male dynamic of earlier versions of the Yang story has now developed into a more ‘historically-accurate’ and contemporary scenario of women battling their own in the arena of public affairs.

Unlike most other presentations of the tale, the characters in *Lady* (2001) do not emerge as fully-fledged widow warriors. Rather, the series traces the development of

warriors from persons of the interior into public figures. There is the Eighth Daughter – Yang Bamei – whose transformation from adolescent troublemaker to mature general provides the anchor from which we relate to the Yangs in the first half of the show. Then there is the growth of a martial maid from outlaw-fortress chief to national patriot: Mu Guiying sacrifices the freedom of her greenwood lifestyle to serve the nation that claims her husband’s family’s loyalty. Personal growth thus serves as a conduit to access and scrutinize the traditionally upheld elements of loyalty and filial piety.

As the sole widow of her generation, Mu Guiying was subservient to two generations of in-laws (Zongbao’s grandmother, She Caihua, and mother, Princess Tsai) – including an excess of widowed aunts-in-law. Also, her dual roles of heroic warrior and wise gentle mother figure (“Yang Men” 2/5) call for subservience in her household role as a young matron/pregnant widow and decisiveness and resolve inherent in her career as the vanguard general of the army whereby her actions reflected not only on the honor of the family but also the nation (“Yang Men” 3/5). In *Lady* (2001), Mu Guiying has a mini-revolt in her ranks when her general aunts refuse to endorse her authority as marshal, deeming her unfit due to her less than docile actions at home – her supposed ‘failures’ in the latter domestic role influenced their treatment of her in her military role. The conflict inherent in the aunts’ warrior roles and their judgemental, conventional notions of filial piety illuminate how these women, active catalysts in making gradual changes to their gendered roles, also help to “validate” and “reproduce” key aspects of the dominant framework (Ebrey, *Inner* 266).

Thus *Lady* (2001) is a study of the complex negotiation of gender and warrior values, serving as a cautionary tale of sorts for women who now are still contesting the

Confucian ritualistic adherence to patriarchy/family values – creating that environment where there is more open negotiation of gender expectations and shifting ‘norms.’

Women can have political/corporate power– but usually at a high cost - the Liao Empress loses her daughters to her ambitions. As with Fa Mulan in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, success is achieved at great personal cost – when social stability is regained and she is supposed to (voluntarily) give up her position of power. As capable but reluctant warriors and traditional role-breakers, the Yang Women are aware of the costs of war, military and otherwise. Unlike Empress Xiao, the Yang Women Warriors who do not allow personal hate to turn destructive, but to fuel their patriotic endeavor at great individual cost. Advocating peace yet embracing war as a means of achieving the former, the Yang Women Warriors are depicted as guardian warriors (like the Door Gods military icons such as Mu Guiying have become). They war not for conquest but for peace. It is this collective community of women who ultimately walk the path of righteousness to serve as a model to future generations of China.

Aware that role changes will not be allowed to overwhelm the dominant structure so quickly and permanently, these ladies are not “rigidly of type” (Cass 122) and are versatile enough to mimick the role most suited to them at a time; ready to transform from supernatural warriorhood to mundane domesticity, transiting smoothly from military warfare to the warriorhood required in negotiating domestic affairs in a patriarchal society. Throughout, there is no sense of the women (singly, or as a community) being unable to live without their men in the ending of *Lady* (2001).

“Women’s history, at its best, does not just inform us about women in the past; it challenges us to reexamine our understandings of history and historical processes”

(Ebrey, Inner 270). Similarly, old stories at their best persist because they encourage us to find relevance and query the process of the present. In stressing the precarious task of stretching and shaping the porous boundaries of the dominant frame, the story of the Yang Women Warriors as told at through the centuries reflects each period's historical conception of the dynamic between tradition and the new, between feminist power and patriarchy.

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¹ Mediaworks is a subsidiary of Singapore Press Holdings. In 2004, Mediaworks merged with Mediacorp, an ironic symbol of the contestation against dominant forces and the slow change in social and cultural consciousness that faced the evolution of women's roles as unveiled by tracing the development of the story of the Yang Woman Warriors.

² "The ancestral temple in Lutijian village not only contains images of Yang Ye and his wife, but also of his heroic offspring, twenty-two in all." (Cheng, <<http://www.meet-greatwall.org/english/gwcn/egwcn14.htm>.>)

³ Yang Ye was greatly feared by the enemy soldiers of the Liao army who were said to have fled upon hearing his name. In fact he was better revered in the Liao records than in official Song History, perhaps because Poon Mei, the man who supposedly caused his eventual death by suicide was a key player in the Song political scene.

⁴ It was the emigrants of the Southern Song Dynasty who created the character of Yang Zongbao, attributing some of Meng-Guang's deeds to him in "Jin4 Yu4 Lu4." ("Yang" 4/4)

⁵ Though there is no official record of her achievements, she lives on in popular folklore and unofficial histories (Lu 149). Like the Yang matriarch Lady She, Mu Guiying was said to have held the seal of the Supreme Commander of the Song/Grand Marshal – for Mu Guiying, this was a singular honor that created personal tensions because not only did her in-laws serve under her but so did her husband. (Lu 149). Like Lady She, Mu Guiying also came from a "mountain" clan/bastion and she thrice defeated Yang Zongbao in battle before marrying him. Daughter of a righteous imperial official who fled to the mountains and set up a Robin Hood existence after being framed, upon marriage, she gave up the freedom of her original Greenwood lifestyle in order to fight for national interest (Huo).

⁶ The courts wished to preserve the story of such loyal and patriotic models while the commoners revelled in their story for it gave hope and vision in times of depression ("Yang" 4/4).

⁷ With turbulence of the Yuan and the Ming dynasties, the latter which saw in their decline incursions by foreigners, the Yang story fueled street entertainment, popular plays and operas. The Yuan Dynasty saw the creation of street entertainment along the lines of "Stealing Yang Ye's bones from the Liao's Sky pagoda" and the Ming Dynasty saw the creation of "The Chronicles of the Yang Family" which was used as a basic source for the further creation of "Northern Song stories." ("Yang" 4/4)

⁸ In 2003, a psychological interrogation of Mu Guiying was presented in a new Peking Opera named for the gallant general. Written by Li Liuyi as the first of his "Trilogy of Heroines in War" series (which will include the stories of "Hua Mulan" and "Liang Hongyu" – wife of another Song general). http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-09/30/content_268787.htm

⁹ Popular versions of the tale are often variations of the Beijing program standard which includes Yang Mengguang as a member of the largely female warrior group. With She Caihua as wise matriarch, the Princess Tsai's gentle strength, the Seventh Daughter-in-law's vivacious resourcefulness and the innocent liveliness of Yang Mengguang as key characters, the stand-out hero is nonetheless Mu Guiying.

¹⁰ However, the modern hangover of equality amongst sexes is similar to what women of the Western feminist movement felt regarding the tension between traditional roles and new possibilities. Urbanized women in China today still feel the pressures of holding up "half the sky" with their day job and the demands of filial piety especially towards Confucian inclined mothers-in-law who have expectations of service after they return home from work.

¹¹ Usually the Song period is associated with "a time when women's situations took a turn for the worse" with the "spread of footbinding and strong condemnation of remarriage by widows" (Ebrey, *Inner* 5) and valuing chastity – all attributed to male dominance and Neo-Confucianism (6). Yet women then also had "particularly strong property rights during that period" and had control over the dowries they brought into the marriages (6).

¹² H.G. Creel in *The Birth of China* writes of the Chinese family: "The authority of the mother was second only to that of the father. If the husband were dead the dowager of the eldest generation reigned almost supreme. The authority of the old woman of position in China is a thing which defies definition" (302).

¹³ Taoism emphasizes the superiority of yin/ “the female principle”/ “passivity over superiority” (Chung, “Women, Politics, and Society” *Palace* 85) and Buddhism emphasizes the equality of all things.

¹⁴ Patricia Chung’s observes in *Palace Women in the Northern Sung* that women as regents were not uncommon then; though typically the regency was accepted without sanction of written law because of practical reasons and Confucian notion of “mother right” (Chung 77).

¹⁵ “Even though most women in premodern societies identified themselves with their roles in their families, the history of women and the history of family have been treated as two distinct, at times even antagonistic, disciplines” (Ebrey, *Inner* 7).

¹⁶ Cass relates in *Dangerous Women* that the center of the “cult” of piety (a “cult of the past”) in traditional China is the family – the gods being the family dead, ancestors made into “deities of the hearth” who watched over the doings of the living as a “critical audience” would (4).

¹⁷ “As a way to ‘improve customs,’ the government conferred honorary banners, grants of grain, or tax exemptions on women who had been widowed young and remained unmarried for long periods” (Ebrey, *Inner* 195). In concluding her chapter on “Widowhood” Ebrey notes: “the exaltation of such widows reinforced patriliney and patriarchy... Exalting the courageous, stubborn, self-sacrificing widow might seem like exaltation of spunky women, but the underlying message was that women really did need men” (203).

¹⁸ Birthing in battle as a means of breaking an evil spell is another trope in the woman warrior stories included in the TVB series “General Father, General Son,” based on Sit Ding San and Fan Lei Fa’s story. Fan is also a superior “foreign” warrior who defeats the man she proposes to several times in battle before he finally marries her. Fan’s story is being filmed again by TVB as “Lady Fan.”

¹⁹ The Liao Empress is also known as “Chen Tian Empress Dowager” after she acted as head of state on behalf of her 11-year-old son who was named Emperor in 983 A.D. She employed Han Chinese intellectuals in court at the expense of Khitan aristocratic privileges – because of her strategy and tactics; she was able to successfully control her court. (Peterson et al, eds., 258). She went into battle with her son and persisted in incursions until Song emperor was forced to call her his “aunt” as a sign of respect and deliver annual tribute; she was also instrumental in establishing friendly relations with Western Xia and Korea (Peterson et al, eds. 260).