

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.1—The Poem of Mulan

Tsiek tsiek and again *tsiek tsiek*,
Mu-lan weaves, facing the door.
You don't hear the shuttle's sound,
You only hear Daughter's sighs.
They ask Daughter who's in her heart,
They ask Daughter who's on her mind.
"No one is in Daughter's heart,
No one is on Daughter's mind.
Last night I saw the draft posters,
The Khan [Emperor] is calling many troops,
The army list is in twelve scrolls,
On every scroll there's Father's name.
Father has no grown-up son,
Mu-lan has no elder brother.
I want to buy a saddle and a horse,
And serve in the army in Father's place.

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At dawn she takes leave of the Yellow River,
In the evening she arrives at Black Mountain.
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,
She only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry *tsiu tsiu*.
She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war,
She crosses passes and mountains like flying.
Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots,
Chilly light shines on iron armor.
Generals die in a hundred battles,
Stout soldiers return after ten years.

On her return she sees the Son of Heaven [Emperor]
The Son of Heaven sits in the Splendid Hall.
He gives out promotions in twelve ranks
And prizes of a hundred thousand and more.
The Khan asks her what she desires.
"Mu-lan has no use for a minister's post.

I wish to ride a swift mount
To take me back to my home.”

When Father and Mother hear Daughter is coming
They go outside the wall to meet her, leaning on each other.
When Elder Sister hears Younger Sister is coming
She fixes her rouge, facing the door.
When Little Brother hears Elder sister is coming
He whets the knife, quick quick, for pig and sheep.
“I open the door to my east chamber,
I sit on my couch in the west room,
I take off my wartime gown
And put on my old-time clothes.”
Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower-powder.
She goes out the door and sees her comrades.
Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed.
Traveling together for twelve years
They didn’t know Mu-lan was a girl.

Source: “The Poem of Mulan,” in *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*, trans. Hans H. Frankel (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 68-70.

The Story of Mulan first appeared during the later Tang Dynasty, but her story reflects the long history of nearly continuous military struggles against the nomadic Xiongnu, who lived on China’s northern borders. The Han dynasty was able to keep the Xiongnu at bay for several hundred years through a combination of military defense and simple bribery. (Han officials found that it was cheaper to pay the Xiongnu to refrain from attacking than to fight them.) But the uneasy truce between the Han and the Xiongnu began to unravel around 50 CE. This crisis, in concert with many others, helped bring down the Han.

Consider the following questions:

- What clues can you find in the poem that Mulan was fighting the Xiongnu?
- Use evidence from the poem to explain how Chinese emperors obtained soldiers for their armies.
- Why do you think Mulan refused the emperor’s offer of a government job as a reward for her loyal military service?
- For discussion: How does *The Poem of Mulan* compare to Disney’s movie, *Mulan*?