

Fa Mu-lan (Before AD 600)



China's Great Warrior

Standing at the top of the hill, Mu-lan's gaze traveled across the valley. The bitter west wind whipped her cheeks and stung her eyes. The rumble of many voices vibrated in the morning air. Thousands of tents dotted the valley and smoke from myriad campfires traced tendrils into an azure sky. The great Yellow River silently snaked its way across the land and out towards the open sea. At Mu-lan's feet, spread out as far as the eye could see, lay the great throng of the emperor's mighty army.

Young Mu-lan watched the bustle of activity and her heart raced with fear. Could she really do this?

Knowing that she had little choice, she straightened her back, drew in a deep breath, and whispered to her stallion, "From this moment on, I am no longer a girl. I am a warrior!"

Fa Mu-lan was born in Shang Yau, China, sometime between the third and sixth centuries, in a time known as the Era of Disunity. The daughter of

a respectable family, Mu-lan spent her days as many Chinese did, preparing meals, washing clothes, and weaving on her loom. Expected to marry and raise a family, girls in ancient China seldom received any formal education, like reading and writing. Instead, they learned important household skills.

One day as young Mu-lan sat weaving, she heard a messenger's cry filter into the room. Twelve times he cried out the news that brutal Tartar tribes had invaded China and that all men must come and fight, according to the emperor's command. Although the message was troubling, it was not unexpected—China was in constant threat of invasion from the Tartars, nomadic tribes that roamed the northern lands known today as Mongolia and Manchuria. The Tartars terrorized the Chinese countryside, plundering fields and raiding cities and towns. They murdered farmers, stole livestock, and looted every home.

China was a huge country with a vast border to protect. In many regions, feudal lords built walls to keep out invaders. In about the third century BC, the walls were joined to form the Great Wall, which stretched across thousands of miles along the northern frontier and ended at the Yellow Sea. At the time that Mu-lan lived, Tartar tribes began invading China, breaking through the Great Wall and raiding farms and villages. This continuous threat forced the Chinese military to seek huge numbers of soldiers to defend the country.

When the emperor's messenger finished his call, he posted the list of names of those who must immediately report for duty. Mu-lan scanned the list and saw her father's name on it, but he was old and frail and Mu-lan was sure that he would not be able to survive the battle. Unfortunately, the order was clear: one man from every house must serve in the emperor's army.

Mu-lan ran to her father's side and begged him not to go. As she comforted him, she struggled to think of a solution. Since there were no sons in the family, someone else must go instead. Mu-lan quickly decided that she would disguise herself as a man and take her father's place in the army.

Her parents strongly protested. A woman disguising herself as a man to fight in battle was unheard of! If anyone found out, the family would be disgraced and Mu-lan would possibly be imprisoned or sentenced to death. But the emperor's word was law: someone from Mu-lan's family must report for battle. For Mu-lan and her parents there appeared to be no other choice.

The notice demanded that the soldiers report by dawn, so Mu-lan

quickly formed her plan. To keep her preparations a secret from her fellow villagers, she traveled to different towns to buy a beautiful, powerful stallion, a saddle, a bridle, and a whip.

After returning home with her purchases, Mu-lan prepared her disguise. Her parents watched sadly as she cut her silky black hair and as she marched back and forth across the room, practicing a soldier's gait. As she talked, she slowly deepened her voice so that she would sound more like a man. She put on her father's armor, which was made of stone squares held together by metal clasps; then she assembled his sword, axe, bow, and arrows. The transformation was complete. Before their eyes, their daughter had changed from a beautiful, young girl into a brave, young warrior.

Darkness cloaked the village when Mu-lan crept out of the house and into the stable. She saddled her horse and rode silently through the sleeping village. Once outside the village, she spurred her horse into a gallop and raced towards the Yellow River Valley.

She finally stopped to rest at the rise above the valley. Below her, camped in the snow, was the emperor's ten thousand-man army. Gathering her courage and knowing that her family was depending on her, she kicked her horse's flank and clung to him as he galloped down the hill. Mu-lan reported for duty and settled into camp.

At dawn the army marched north to join the other Chinese armies gathering for war. Their numbers swelled and soon Mu-lan was buried in a sea of soldiers. They would all be needed to battle against the invading Tartars.

The Tartars were a feared enemy force that used its mobility to military advantage, appearing when least expected and surrounding Chinese troops. Known as excellent horsemen, the Tartars bred wild horses into mounts of great strength and stamina. With the invention of the stirrup, their archers soon learned to shoot while on horseback, giving them an even greater advantage.

Mu-lan faced this formidable fighting force on her first morning of battle. The pounding of war drums vibrated in the air as Mu-lan's horse neighed with anticipation, nostrils flaring. The order to attack sounded down the line and the horses surged forward. A mass of horseflesh and armor surrounded Mu-lan, as well as screams of rage and pain. Arrows flew across the sky and soon her thoughts were only on survival and battling the enemy.

Suddenly China's great army began to weaken. Watching the Tartar

assault gather strength, many of the Chinese soldiers thought that the battle was lost, but Mu-lan mustered her courage and refused to surrender. She called for them to follow her and for them to be brave and to fight for their families, for their homes, and for China!

The soldiers turned and followed Mu-lan back into battle. The force of their sudden assault surprised the enemy and the Tartar line broke. The Chinese army scattered the Tartars and they fled the battlefield. By nightfall every soldier was telling the story of Mu-lan's courageous attack.

As the months passed, Mu-lan's physical strength increased and she learned to wield a sword with great accuracy. She studied the war strategies of great generals and read the writings of Sun Tzu, the ancient master of warfare. Sun Tzu's book, *The Art of War*, taught her how to plan attacks and position the troops. Her courage, leadership, and tactical skills soon caught the attention of the emperor's officials. She rose through the army ranks and eventually commanded her own company. She even led a small troop that made surprise raids on the Tartars. Finally, after winning hundreds of battles against the Tartars, Mu-lan was promoted to general.

After twelve long years, the war finally ended and Mu-lan was free to go home. The story of Mu-lan's bravery spread throughout the country, and she was summoned to appear before the emperor. She traveled to the royal city of Loyang. An older and wiser Mu-lan entered the palace and bowed before the emperor of China.

In return for her bravery, the emperor offered Mu-lan great gifts: twelve medals of honor and one thousand strings of coins. When asked what other gifts she wanted, Mu-lan simply asked for permission to return home.

Surrounded by an honor guard of soldiers, Mu-lan arrived at her village a few days later. She entered the gates of her home and was greeted with cheers from her family and friends. As the preparations for her welcome feast began, Mu-lan entered the house, happy to be back in her childhood home. She took off her helmet and armor and put on traditional women's clothing. After powdering her face, she combed her hair and adorned it with flowers. When she stepped into the courtyard, her fellow soldiers stared in amazement. They recognized her, but they had had no idea that the brave man they had fought beside for all those years was really a young woman.

One soldier, a special friend whose life she had saved many times, stepped forward and asked her to be his wife. An excited Mu-lan said yes,

but under one condition. She asked only that he treat her as an equal, with the same honor and respect as he had when he thought that she was a man. He happily complied.

Today children of China are still told this heroic story. Fa Mu-lan is remembered in poems, ballads, and Chinese opera. A temple in Yin Kok village silently protects the ancient stone tablets that tell the story of this great warrior. It honors the memory of the young girl who went into battle and helped save a nation.

