



The Secret of Mulan

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PART 1

Mulan was sitting at her loom, weaving silk with a carved bone shuttle. Her fingers plucked distractedly at the threads and, for the hundredth time that morning, she scowled at the scroll on the floor beside her.

'By order of the mighty Tuoba Khan, the following three thousand men are to join the imperial army. They will ride north to Taihang and crush Flying Swallow's bandit horde.'

Half way up the scroll was her father's name, Hua Hu.

"My father can't fight!" Mulan cried out loud. "His hair is grey, his wrists are weak and his back is as bent as a cypress bow. If only he had a son to take his place!"

The shuttle fell silent. The seventeen-year-old gazed up at her father's *jian*, a long ridged sword displayed above the door. *If only he had a son to take his place.*



Mulan got up from the loom. With trembling fingers she took down the sword and began to circle the room with skilful footwork, remembering the martial training of her youth.

Faster and faster she wielded the *jian*; its bright steel glinting like frost against the red silk of her dress. Then she grasped the long glossy plait behind her back and lifted the sword to the nape of her neck.



One powerful, clean slice was all it took.

Her father and mother were feeding the chickens when Mulan appeared. Gone were her jewellery, face powder, cotton and silk, and in their place chain mail, riding vest, tunic and boots. Her bow and quiver clung to her back. Her chin jutted proudly. Her father's *jian* hung from her belt.

"You're only a girl," Hua Hu croaked, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Mulan threaded her hands around his neck. "*I know that,*" she whispered in his ear, "*but no one else will.*"



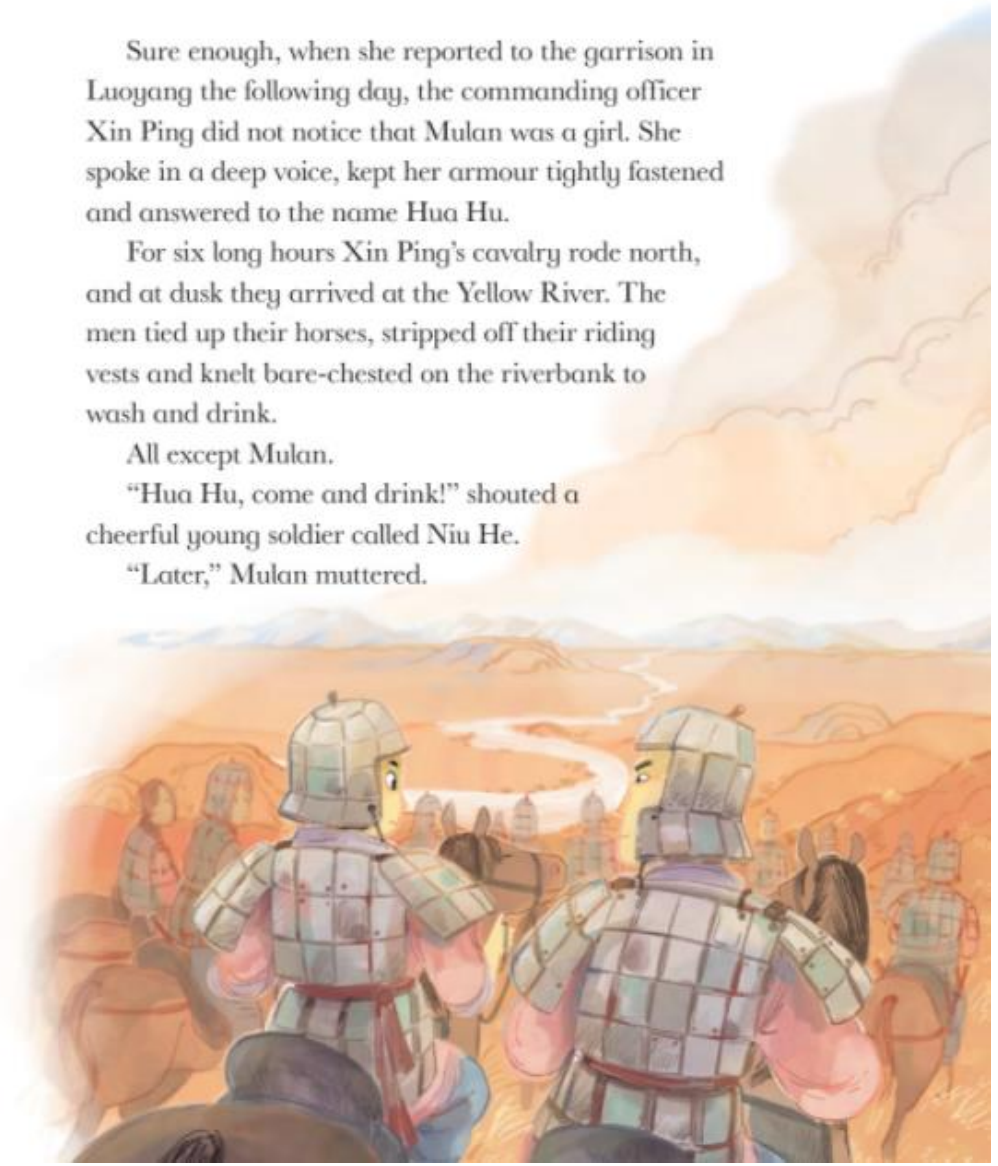
Sure enough, when she reported to the garrison in Luoyang the following day, the commanding officer Xin Ping did not notice that Mulan was a girl. She spoke in a deep voice, kept her armour tightly fastened and answered to the name Hua Hu.

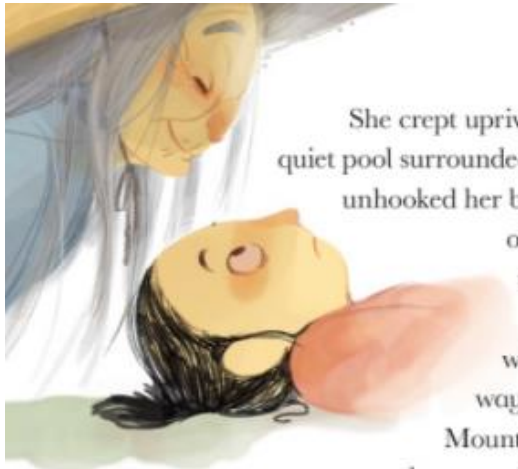
For six long hours Xin Ping's cavalry rode north, and at dusk they arrived at the Yellow River. The men tied up their horses, stripped off their riding vests and knelt bare-chested on the riverbank to wash and drink.

All except Mulan.

"Hua Hu, come and drink!" shouted a cheerful young soldier called Niu He.

"Later," Mulan muttered.





She crept upriver out of sight and found a quiet pool surrounded by silver pine trees. There she unhooked her belt, shrugged the chain mail off and flung herself down on the grass.

"This is crazy," Mulan whispered. "I can't ride all the way to Taihang. I can't fight Red Mountain bandits. I already miss my home and my parents. I'm only a girl."

"Only a girl!" mimicked a mocking voice.

Bending over Mulan was a white-haired crone. Her skin was as wrinkly as yuzu fruit but her eyes were bright as stars.

Mulan jumped to her feet and drew her shining *jian*. "You misheard," she said. "My name is Hua Hu, and I am on my way to battle Flying Swallow's bandit horde."

"Your arm is strong," the stranger said, "but your life-force is feeble-feeble. *I am only a girl*, you say! And what of me, Mulan? I am only an old woman, am I not?"

With that, the crone leaped high in the air and swept her foot in a perfect arc, knocking the sword from Mulan's grasp. A wrinkled fist struck Mulan in the abdomen with such extraordinary force that Mulan flew back **splosh** into the horsetail reeds at the edge of the pool.



Mulan blinked and shook her head. "Who are you?" she stuttered. "How do you know my name?"

"I am Daiyu," the old crone said, "and I too am no lover of bandits. Tonight I shall teach you everything I know. I shall teach you to strengthen your life-force and channel it at will. I shall teach you to resist the hardest of blows, to kick like a horse and to shin up a cliff like a butterfly lizard. But first, agree to one condition."

"What's that?"

"Never EVER say *only a girl*."

