

# QIU JIN: AN EXEMPLAR OF CHINESE FEMINISM, REVOLUTION, AND NATIONALISM AT THE END OF THE QING DYNASTY

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War flames in the north—when will it all end?  
I hear the fighting at sea continues unabated.  
Like the women of Qishi, I worry about my country in vain;  
It's hard to trade kerchief and dress for a helmet.<sup>1</sup>

Qiu Jin is widely hailed as China's first feminist and is unequivocally recognized for her heroic martyrdom at the hands of the Qing dynasty in 1907; however, her legacy is far more rich and complicated than being a female revolutionary martyr. In an era in which women had few rights, Qiu Jin chose to doff her kerchief and dress not only to champion causes related to women but to fight for her beloved country against tyranny and oppression. Qiu Jin was a well-educated and prolific writer, a self-proclaimed knight-errant, an outspoken critic of the Qing Dynasty and traditional Confucian ideals, a fervent supporter of women's rights, an outspoken believer in ending the practice of footbinding, a revolutionary martyr, a gifted poet, was skilled in several weapons, and was a skilled

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1 Qiu Jin. "War flames in the north—when will it all end," in Joan Judge et al. *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, California: Global, Area, and International Archive University of California Press, 2011), 1.

horseback rider and warrior, trained in several weapons and traditional Chinese martial arts.<sup>2</sup> Yet, rarely is she remembered for all of her achievements which diminishes the importance of her rich legacy and demeans the identity she forged for herself. Qiu Jin's role and place in China's revolutionary history and her importance as both a feminist and a revolutionary cannot be examined by looking at just part of who she was.

Qiu Jin was born in 1875 into a China that was struggling with attempts to modernize, increasing discontent among its populace with Qing rulership, Western Imperial interest, and loss of territory through multiple unsuccessful uprisings and lost wars. This environment produced many of the scholars and revolutionaries who would become influential in the 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth Movement, and in the Chinese Republic of the 1920s. The China of Qiu Jin's childhood and formative years was still firmly patriarchal and adhered strongly to Confucian ideals despite early calls for modernization and women's rights by renowned reformers like Kang Youwei, and later by his disciple, Liang Qichao. According to Kang Youwei, China's "present trouble [lay] in [their] clinging to old institutions without knowing how to change" and that "if the national policy is not fixed and public opinion not united, it will be impossible for [China] to give up the old and adopt the new."<sup>3</sup> Kang's critique of the Confucian bureaucracy and the Qing government would be echoed by many other

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2 Mary Backus Rankin. "The Emergence of Women at the End of the Ch'ing: The Case of Ch'iu Chin," in Margery Wolf et al. *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 46.

3 Kang Youwei. "The Need for Reforming Institutions," in Wm. Theodore de Bary et al. *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Second Edition, Volume II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 269.

intellectuals and reformers. This type of sentiment, and the fervent calls for the education of women made by Liang Qichao, undoubtedly influenced the revolutionary sentiments of Qiu Jin.

Qiu Jin was fortunate to enjoy a privileged childhood as a beloved and oft-indulged daughter of lesser gentry. According to historian Mary Backus Rankin, Qiu Jin "...received a good education, along with her elder brother and younger sister and brother, in the family school" and that "It is difficult to disentangle the facts about her childhood from later mythology, but clearly she was indulged by her parents to an unusual extent. Her feet were almost certainly bound, but perhaps not very tightly."<sup>4</sup> This unconventional childhood with a multitude of freedoms and opportunities was not afforded to the typical Chinese girl, though, it does give a great deal of insight into the factors that shaped Qiu Jin's adult life. Another historian, Hu Ying, notes that Qiu Jin's family was very close and often gathered to recite and create poetry, a pursuit which Qiu Jin would continue for the rest of her life.<sup>5</sup> Also of particular note, is the fact that Qiu Jin may not have had her feet bound as tightly as other young girls did, which likely enabled her to pursue martial training with more ease than would otherwise have been possible.

Footbinding was an ancient and well-established institution by

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4 Mary Backus Rankin. "The Emergence of Women at the End of the Ch'ing: The Case of Ch'iu Chin," in Margery Wolf et al. *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 46.

5 Hu Ying. "How Can a Daughter Glorify the Family Name: Filiality and Women's Rights in the Late Qing" *Nan Nü* 11 (2009), 258.. DOI: 10.1163/138768009x12586661923027

the time Qiu Jin was born. According to scholar Fan Hong, the foot “became the most erotic part of the female body,” and that “women have always shown a willingness to maim themselves to achieve male-defined standards of beauty and to win love and admiration.”<sup>6</sup> Though it was considered alluring and a prerequisite for a good marriage, the practice of footbinding was often crippling and made participation in the social spheres outside the home difficult. Today, historian Dorothy Ko believes that the practice of footbinding was even attacked by Qiu Jin’s contemporary, Liang Qichao when he claimed that ““All two hundred million of our women are consumers; not a single one has produced anything of profit... No wonder men keep them as dogs, horses, and slaves.””<sup>7</sup> This scathing rebuke of the inability of women to work outside the domestic sphere and contribute to society as a whole was intended, no doubt, to spur the Chinese people into accepting reforms, particularly those aimed at educating women and bringing an end to footbinding. Bringing about these reforms would not be a fast process; the practice was ingrained in Chinese culture, and despite the negative side effects it had on women, footbinding was not fully abolished until the middle part of the twentieth century.

Though Qiu Jin’s family was forward thinking in their treatment of women in many ways, marriage was not one of them. Qiu Jin’s marriage was arranged, as was traditional, and though it came in her early twenties,

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6 Fan Hong. *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom: The Liberation of Women’s Bodies in Modern China*. (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1997), 45-46.

7 Dorothy Ko. *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

which was later than the norm for many young Chinese women, it was not her choice. Qiu Jin lamented her unhappy marriage in her poetry, notably her sadness at being forced into a traditional female role, in her poem “Manjianghong”:

Alas, they sent me off by force to be mere “rouge and powder,”  
How I despise it!

My body will not allow me  
To join the ranks of men,  
But my heart is far braver  
Than that of a man.  
All my life, has not my liver and gall  
Burned for others?  
But how could they with their vulgar minds understand me?<sup>8</sup>

Qiu Jin was deeply saddened at being forced into a traditional female role after the relative freedom of her childhood, and her poem reflects this. She writes of longing to join her male compatriots in their struggles against the Qing Dynasty and in improving China and also of the inability to do so while forced into a traditionally feminine role. The use of poetry as a medium, both to express political and revolutionary desires as well as her emotions, would become one of Qiu Jin’s hallmarks.

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8 Qiu Jin. “Manjianghong.” in Hu Ying. “How Can a Daughter Glorify the Family Name: Filiality and Women’s Rights in the Late Qing” *Nan Nü 11* (2009), 259. DOI: 10.1163/138768009x12586661923027

Qiu Jin's discontent and desire to affect change in China were the impetuses that led her to leave her husband and children in 1903 and join other like-minded Chinese intellectuals, reformers, and revolutionaries in Japan. After liberating herself from her marriage, Qiu Jin was free to pursue the nationalist and reformist ideals which she held so dearly. Qiu Jin was involved in the creation and promotion of anti-footbinding societies and made speeches demonstrating her fervent opposition of the practice. For Qiu Jin, ending the practice of footbinding and increasing the status of women was as much a matter of nationalist pride as it was an imperative to better the lives and states of her fellow women. In her speech, "An Address to My Two Hundred Million Women Compatriots in China," Qiu Jin echoes sentiments that Liang Qichao wrote in his condemnation of footbinding, and admonishes Chinese women by saying "You who are married to men without money should support your husbands in their labors and not spend your days in idleness, dining on unearned food."<sup>9</sup> In this speech, Qiu Jin also stressed the need to educate women and attempted to sway her listeners to lend their support to allowing women to have a role in choosing their marriage partners by denouncing the process of matchmaking and calling the inability of women to divorce or have redress for the wrongs of their husbands "...injustice [with] nowhere to lodge a complaint."<sup>10</sup> Though there are many passages that admonish the women of China, the overall message is meant to inspire and empower the women of China and

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9 Qiu Jin, "An Address to My Two Hundred Million Women Compatriots in China," in Janet Chen et al., *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 187.

10 Ibid, 185.

urge them to better themselves so that they too can contribute to society in a meaningful way and help modernize China.

One of the most notable things about Qiu Jin and her sometimes larger than life personality was that she chose to adopt the role of a knight-errant, similar to Hua Mulan, another well-known female Chinese hero and a personal role model of Qiu Jin's. However, unlike Hua Mulan, who after her deed of filial piety and service in her father's name in the army, "takes off her armor, puts on her dress and makeup, and effortlessly resumes her old life," Qiu Jin chose to leave her feminine identity as a wife and mother behind to serve all of China.<sup>11</sup> This is a distinction that is important to note. For Hua Mulan, the adoption of the role of knight-errant was meant to be temporary and was done as an expression of piety and of duty to her father, both of which were respected Confucian ideals. Qiu Jin chose to adopt the role of knight-errant as an act of defiance and rebellion in the face of traditional Confucian womanhood in order to save her country from the problems that plagued it. Both of these women dressed as men, though in Hua Mulan's case it was as a member of the army. Qiu Jin adopted "Japanese women's dress (specifically, that of a Japanese woman warrior with sword drawn), Manchu male dress, and Western male dress" as she forged her identity as a knight-errant and a revolutionary.<sup>12</sup>

The knight-errant (nǚxia) is a common figure in traditional Chinese literature, and according to historian Roland Altenburger, the female

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11 Shiamin Kwa et al. *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2010), xi.

12 Ibid. xxvi.

knight-errant in particular is represented by thematic elements of needles and swords. The needle refers to “the classic skill of the domestic Chinese woman and [is] hence a symbol of the conventional female gender role” and the sword represents “the technique of sword fighting and other martial skills.... [And] the swordswoman typically lacks the skill of the needle.”<sup>13</sup> Though Qiu Jin did marry and adhere to traditional definitions of womanhood for a time, according to an account by her brother, Qiu Jin was not instructed in traditional women’s skills until she was fifteen years of age.<sup>14</sup> His account of Qiu Jin’s late and ostensibly minimal tutelage in women’s skills would reinforce the literary tradition of the female knight-errant’s lack of domestic ability. Qiu Jin adopted the sobriquet ‘The Female Knight-Errant of Mirror Lake’, and according to Roland Altenburger “her style and textual evidence indicate that the *nüxia* tradition, particularly the Nie Yinniang model of assassination for social justice, was another important reference point for this martial heroine.”<sup>15</sup> Given that Qiu Jin was executed for the attempted assassination of a Qing official during the struggle to free China from the aging and decrepit Qing Imperial government, Altenburger’s assertion carries weight.

Qiu Jin’s identity as a knight-errant is further reflected in her poetry and her political beliefs are strongly evident in her poem “Song of the Precious Sword.” Qiu Jin voices her anti-Manchu sentiment and

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13 Roland Altenburger. *The Sword or the Needle: The Female Knight-errant (xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative*. (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2009), 10.

14 Mary Backus Rankin, “The Emergence of Women at the End of the Ch’ing,” 46.

15 Roland Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle*, 367.



discontent with Qing rule in no uncertain terms in the line: “The sad song of a defeated nation fills my eyes with tears,” and again later in the lines “Those white devils coming from the West served as a bell,/ They woke us Chinese up from our slaves’ dream.”<sup>16</sup> Her fervent desire to take up arms, as a knight-errant, and save her people is evident when she writes “You, my lord, gave me this gold-speckled sword, /Today as I receive it, my mind is virile and brave.”<sup>17</sup> The reference she makes to virility and bravery showcases her willingness and desire to be compared to and act in a traditionally male role. According to historian Joan Judge, Qiu Jin sought to defy the prescribed gender roles for women and men of her era and “not [to] equal men but to surpass them,” and that it would be up to women “to take responsibility for China’s future and overcome the past errors of male civilization.”<sup>18</sup> These bold sentiments were the quintessential essence of Qiu Jin and would come to define how she was remembered after her execution.

Qiu Jin cultivated her image as a revolutionary carefully, partially out of a desire to build her own legend while she was living, and partially because she knew that being a visible and identifiable part of the revolutionary and reform efforts would increase the exposure of both. According to Joan Judge, Qiu Jin wanted to “transcend the identity of ‘women’ by shocking her male compatriots and leaving a mark in national history,”

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16 Qiu Jin, “Song of the Precious Sword,” in Janet Chen et al., *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 185.

17 Ibid.

18 Joan Judge *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, The West, and the Woman Question in China*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 220.

and that “this was manifest in her highly self-conscious acts of cross dressing.”<sup>19</sup> Qiu Jin also took care to have her forays into public while wearing men’s clothing and Japanese warrior dress photographed in what can only be called an attempt to gain attention through publicity.<sup>20</sup> Though it may seem like her behavior and desire for publicity was an act, Qiu Jin, according to historian Hu Ying, “unbound her feet, dressed as a man and taught physical education and military drills” which indicated a sincerity in her motives and in her own new-found freedom.<sup>21</sup> If both historian’s points are taken into account it would suggest that Qiu Jin was keen to leave a strong impression of both her revolutionary nature and her desire to challenge gender boundaries by refusing to adopt the role of traditional Chinese womanhood. This, combined with her skill at oratory, her published works, and her outspoken nature ensured her fame both as a revolutionary and later, after her death, as a renowned national hero, just as she would have desired.

Qiu Jin was well known in revolutionary circles before the failed assassination attempt for which she was executed. This is evidenced by an account written later by Song Qingling, also known as Madame Sun Yat-Sen, who wrote: “[Qiu Jin] one of the noblest martyrs of the revolution, was second in command of an underground republican organization with its own armed forces in Chekiang. She lost her life when she failed in an

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19 Ibid, 217.

20 Ibid.

21 Hu Ying. “How Can a Daughter Glorify the Family Name: Filiality and Women’s Rights in the Late Qing,” 265.

attempt to assassinate En Ming, the Manchu governor.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite this recognition by the wife of Sun Yat-Sen, who was arguably the most iconic and important man involved with the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the 1911 Revolution, Qiu Jin and her martyrdom played nearly no role in the revolutionary struggles that continued into the 1920s. Qiu Jin became an overnight icon after her martyrdom in 1907, but was not officially recognized for her roles as a revolutionary and a martyr leading up to the 1911 Revolution, because, according to gender historian Christina K. Gilmartin, “Sun Yat-sen was the incarnation of Chinese nationalism,” and “nationalist revolutionary ideology of the mid-1920s in Guangdong was so strongly imbued with a male identity that it militated against the creation of a full-fledged mother of the revolution.”<sup>23</sup> This omission from the annals of revolutionary history in the 1920s did little to denigrate the memory of Qiu Jin and her contributions to the earlier revolutionary efforts. Qiu Jin’s status as a national hero and revolutionary martyr, and attempts to control the nature of her legacy began almost immediately after her execution.

Qiu Jin, a prolific poet, wrote several poems in the days leading up to her 1907 execution, one of which was almost a premonition for what would occur over the next seventy-four years with her remains. She wrote: “My flesh reduced to dust, / My bones reduced to powder, / Such fate is

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22 Sung Ch’ing-ling. “Chinese Women’s Fight for Freedom,” in Li Yu-Ning *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992), 89.

23 Christina K. Gilmartin. *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1995), 206.

now a banality.”<sup>24</sup> After Qiu Jin’s execution, she was hastily buried with no memorial, and then buried and reburied a total of nine times before she was finally enshrined for the final time by the Communist Party in 1981.<sup>25</sup> These multiple reburials by Qiu Jin’s son, close friends, and by the Chinese Communist Party were all attempts to control the legacy and memory of the famous revolutionary martyr. Chief amongst the interested parties were her three dear friends, Wu Zhiying, Xu Zihua, and Xu Shuangyun who together formed the Qiu Jin Society and saw that despite the destruction of her first memorial, that her epitaph and remains were preserved.<sup>26</sup> They likely did this out respect for their friend and in protest to her son’s desire to honor her in a Confucian manner, something Qiu Jin likely would not have approved of. Her graves and memorials were destroyed multiple times by the Chinese government; first by the Qing to prevent recognition of Qiu Jin as a martyr and then later by the Communist government during the Cultural Revolution as part of the effort to rid the country of the old-fashioned, non-Communist cultural remnants.

Her final, and most lavish burial, complete with a marble statue, was initiated by the Communist Party after the end of the Cultural Revolution and returned her remains to West Lake, near the original site her friends had obtained.<sup>27</sup> This burial, like anything undertaken by a

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24 Qiu Jin. “My flesh reduced to dust,” in Hu Ying “Qiu Jin’s Nine Burials: The Making of Historical Monuments and Public Memory.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* Vol. 19, No. 1. (2007), 138.

25 Hu Ying “Qiu Jin’s Nine Burials: The Making of Historical Monuments and Public Memory.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* Vol. 19, No. 1. (2007), 138-139.

26 Ibid, 152-153.

27 Ibid, 170.

government was not without political motive. The Chinese Communist Party, according to Hu Ying, used Qiu Jin as a symbol of “revolutionary nationalism,” and also as symbol of “the ineffectiveness of the ‘old democratic revolution,’” to reinforce their legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, they chose to depict Qiu Jin in a stylized and distinctly feminine manner, paying marginal homage to her self-chosen role as a knight-errant with the addition of a sword held at rest, in a manner that a swordsman never would have held a blade.<sup>29</sup> Though this could be taken as an attempt to demean the legacy and insult the identity that Qiu Jin forged for herself, it can also be viewed as another reinvention of Qiu Jin and an attempt by the Communist Party to acknowledge an early and sometimes overlooked hero from the pre-Communist Revolutionary era. This final reburial also can be seen as a reversal of the policies of the Cultural Revolution and a recognition of Qiu Jin’s importance in modern Chinese history.

Qiu Jin chose to garb herself in men’s clothing and fight for her country in the ways she best knew how: through oratory, poetry, martial prowess, and revolutionary organization. She reinvented her image several times during her lifetime, and each incarnation existed to serve and reinforce her ideals, and therefore her country. In some sense, Qiu Jin may well have been pleased with this final public incarnation of herself, as she has been given one last chance to serve the people of China, which was always her greatest desire. Qiu Jin’s rich legacy comes as much from her

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28 Ibid, 171.

29 Ibid, 172.

unique feminism, willingness to act, and bold personality as it does from her essays and poetry. Qiu Jin's strength came from within; she chose to remain steadfast and true to her ideals, even under torture and in the face of death. Qiu Jin's legend, like many others grows with each retelling, and though no historical source can prove unequivocally that she opted to forgo her last words in lieu of writing a poem, the act is well in line with what she would have chosen to do. According to Mary Backus Rankin, "news-papers reported the story (which may or may not have been factual) that shortly before her execution she asked for pen and paper and wrote, 'Autumn rain and autumn wind, I die of sorrow.'"<sup>30</sup> Whether the tale is true, or not, it was the action of a knight-errant who sought to make her mark upon China and save the country she loved from the encroaching Western powers and the rule of the impotent and out-of-touch Qing Dynasty.

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30 Mary Backus Rankin, *Women in Chinese Society*, 62.

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