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48 Women Warriors

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NEWSLETTER

Sex, love and revolution

In the 1940s and 1950s, women from Central Luzon in the Philippines and in North Vietnam responded overwhelmingly to the call of revolution by leaders of the Huk movement and the Viet Minh.¹ Many abandoned traditional roles in Philippine and Vietnamese society to participate in their armed revolutionary struggle. The presence and participation of these women overturned many of the usual conventions in running a political and revolutionary organisation.

But it was not only the general public that expressed ambivalence about these women. Incorporating women into the military and political struggle waged by the Huks did not come easily to the male-dominated leadership of the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* (PKP) or the Communist Party of the Philippines. While the Party was formally committed to sexual equality, sexist and patriarchal attitudes often prevented women from assuming a larger role in the rebellion. And many women guerrillas were forced to conform to traditional social roles inside the movement, doing much of the cooking, washing and house-keeping. These contradictions in the treatment of women created tensions within the Huk movement, and by 1950, Huk leaders were seriously concerned about the way military effectiveness and solidarity were being undermined by sexual and gender conflicts.

Revolutionary solution of the sex problem

Foremost among the problems raised by the leadership was 'sex opportunism' or the 'sex problem'.⁴ Many married men in the movement, including Communist Party members, separated from their wives, took a 'forest wife', usually a young, single woman in the camps. This became

continued on page 4 >

VINA A. LANZONA

The Huks and the Viet Minh forces have a lot in common. They both fought for national liberation during World War Two and launched a struggle against returning colonial governments in the post war period. The anti-Japanese army of the Huks was considered as the most successful resistance army in Asia, but unlike the Viet Minh, its Communist-led rebellion after the war was defeated by US counter-insurgency operations. Both were also important for another, less well-known reason - they were the first major political and military organisation in their countries to include and actively recruit women.

While pursuing its revolutionary agenda against the newly created Philippine Republic, Huk female insurgents elicited a certain fascination in the public imagination through sensational news accounts of their exploits.² Recruited via familial and village networks, Huk women - most of them from peasant families, poorly educated and generally perceived as traditional and passive - studied the tenets of Marxism, trained as soldiers and spies, and learned to use weapons. Occupying the full range of military roles, some of these Filipina revolutionaries attained formidable, even fearsome reputations as aggressive fighters - hence their image as 'Amazons' within the wider culture.³

Tobias Rettig and Vina Lanzona's theme 'Women Warriors in Asia' demonstrates not just modern women in combat but a long history and tradition of Asian women in warfare and activism. pp.1 - 15

Ian Ang gives us the view from 'Down Under' and asks can Australia ever be part of Asia? pp. 18-19

Portrait: Stefan Landsberger gives us privileged access to his stunning collection of PRC propaganda art. pp. 26-27

New for Review + Bookmarked: pp. 28-29



continued from page 1 >

the subject of bitter criticism within and outside the movement. After acrimonious debates, Communist Party leaders drew up a remarkable document entitled "Revolutionary Solution of the Sex Problem" that permitted married male guerrillas to have extramarital relationships with single female cadres as long as they followed strict regulations.⁵ Claiming 'biological necessity', the frustrated cadre was expected to present his problem to his superiors and convince them that either his health or his work was being adversely affected by the absence of his wife. After an unofficial review, a married man was allowed to take a 'forest wife' as long as both his legal and forest wives were aware of the arrangement, and he agreed to settle down with only one woman at the end of the struggle.

The Huk leadership also worried greatly about what they called 'the family problem', the reluctance of both women and men to become more active in the rebellion, and to join the 'expansion teams' attempting to spread the insurgency beyond its stronghold in Central Luzon, because this meant separating from their families. Men also frequently embezzled movement funds in order to support their families. And there was the 'baby problem', when dedicated female revolutionaries left the movement once they got pregnant.⁶ The Party's solution to these problems was to encourage the integration of spouses and older children into the movement, and the distribution of younger children to friends and relatives not involved in the rebellion. These discussions reveal the significance of sexual and gender tensions within the Huk movement, but the regulations the leadership imposed placed women under the political and sexual control of men.

Private desires in the public realm

Indeed, amidst the exceptional circumstances of female participation in the Huk movement, most of them also fell into quite typical patterns of romance, marriages, pregnancy and childbearing. Throughout, Huk women struggled to reconcile their personal desires for intimacy with the impersonal aims of the revolution, while Huk men navigated uneasily between the demands of matrimonial responsibility and what they referred to as 'biological necessity'. In practice, both sexes tended to default to more traditional gender roles, and in so doing missed a unique chance to transform their revolutionary rhetoric into an even more revolutionary reality.

Ultimately, the Huks' hesitant and contradictory attitude towards women compromised both the commitment of individual cadres and the strength of the movement. While the inclusion of women in the Huk Rebellion introduced unanticipated strains, within those very challenges lay latent opportunities. Although many women in the movement never really left their traditional roles, others were transformed through the demands placed upon them, finding within themselves wellsprings of political activism and creativity only partially tapped by the revolution's leadership. By actively recruiting women yet relegating them to support roles, by advancing a few women to positions of command yet allowing most to serve the sexual needs of male leaders, the party fostered disaffection amongst Huk men and women in its ranks. By promoting patriarchal assumptions about gender roles and sexuality, but failing to take into consideration the extent to which participation in the Huk movement transformed attitudes towards gen-

der and sexuality amongst Huk men and women, Huk leaders allowed an organisational strength to become an organisational liability.

Nonetheless, despite their limitations, the Huks did make the emotional and sexual lives of their male and female members part of the revolutionary agenda. Sex and

family moved from the private to the public realm, and the private interests and desires of individual cadres were weighed in relation to the collective interests of the revolutionary movement. Personal issues of family, sex, and morality became integral to the movement's political and social goals, and were subject to bureaucratic and administrative control. Indeed, the

Huks attempted not only to revolutionise politics but also gender relations within and outside the movement. But this was a sexual and gender revolution that remains unfinished up to this day.

Finding a balance in revolutionary life

Women in the Vietnamese Revolution also attempted to balance their personal and revolutionary lives, but the leadership did not merely replicate Huk sexual and familial policies. From the beginning, Ho Chi Minh called on the women to join the struggle for Vietnam. Since 1930, Party doctrine had encouraged women to believe there was a place in the Party hierarchy for them, and that they would not be tied to the home and the demands of their husbands and oppressive mothers-in-law. By the 1940s, the Party was advocating "universal suffrage, democratic liberties, equality among all ethnic groups and between men and women". "Uncle Ho" had also spoken informally of an end to arranged marriages and of the opportunities for women to learn to read, study, participate in politics and be truly men's equals. And women - from both the North and the South - responded enthusiastically to his call to fight against the returning French colonial forces during the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the US-backed South Vietnamese government during the Second Indochina War (1959-1975).⁷

Like Huk women, the Vietnamese women, at their sexual and emotional prime, were separated from family and familiar support networks, and endured days and months of hardships, isolation and suffering as guerrillas. But unlike the Huks, there seemed to be no clear policy on sexual and personal relationships in the Viet Minh. During the early years of the

Vietnamese Communist movement, in the 1920s and 1930s, in efforts to 'proletarianise the party', all Vietnamese activists were called on to sacrifice their old lives, abandon bourgeois attitudes all for the sake of the communist revolution and the 'working classes'. For female activists, this meant they had to renounce their right to raise their children, and sometimes were expected to put their bodies at the service of the revolution by living as the 'wives' of male activists, or what others termed as 'fictive marriages'.⁸

As the war progressed, Vietnamese women were asked to sacrifice more of their personal and sexual lives, as they became increasingly torn between their duties to their families and their duties to the nation. The Communist Party encouraged women to hold off on love and marriage until after the war ended, and for women in North Vietnam, this resulted in unhealthy relationships with men who regarded them as past their reproductive prime, and possessed scarred, unattractive and infertile bodies.⁹

In many respects, therefore, the Huks, in both their acknowledgement and regulation of personal, sexual and familial issues in the movement were more sensitive to the needs of their cadres, particularly men. At the same time, their actions acknowledged (rather than ignored) the presence of women and created a space for them to exist in this male-dominated organisation. Indeed, their approach may be interpreted as ideologically lax, an adaptation to 'bourgeois tendencies' such as romantic love and family relationships. And yet, such practices seem consistent with more tolerant cultural attitudes on gender in Philippine society.

Inextricable personal and political links

How did these personal relationships affect the internal dynamics of both the Huk and Vietnamese movements? Did the Vietnam Communist Party's gender policies (or perhaps the lack of such policies) contribute to the success of its revolution? On the one hand, this assumption supports any sense that the inadequacy of gender policies weakened the Huk movement. In Vietnam, it seems that a stricter culture of intolerance may have contributed to their success. And perhaps the laxity of the Huks was a fatal weakness. But as studies on the Vietnamese Revolution suggest, such masculine tendencies in their movements may have also alienated many of its female members.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese Revolution existed on an entirely different plane of struggle from the Huks. Stronger and better organised militarily, they enjoyed a degree of support from the Chinese Communists that the geographically isolated Huks could only dream about. The Huks also had no Ho Chi Minh, a leader who was more intellectually attuned to Communist dogma, and exuded larger-than-life personality and right from the beginning included women in their struggles.

But while the Huks and the Vietnamese revolutionaries shared similar goals and experiences but differed on their official policies and strategies, particularly with regard to issues of love, sex and the family, what this brief exploration demonstrates is that indeed the personal is inextricably linked to the political in revolutionary movements. And women, in whatever roles they played, were as central to revolutions as men, but it is their very presence,



The Philippines Free Press declares, "Leonora Hipas, a former pistol-packing Amazon, is shown as she and her new husband surrendered to the government. With the Huks she dressed like a man. Like all girls, she wanted a wedding gown for her marriage." Courtesy Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University.



their unflinching, however conflicted, commitment and dedication to the struggle that transform revolutionary movements to consider issues of gender and sexuality as seriously as military goals and political ideology.

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Notes

1 *The Huk rebellion* (1942-1956) was a result of two separate, peasant-based struggles in the Philippines, first against the Japanese and then against the new Philippine Republic. The Viet Minh was a national liberation movement that sought independence from the French and fought for the unification of Vietnam after World War Two.

2 Major works on the *Huk rebellion*, including Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion* (2002), Lachica, *Huk: Philippine Agrarian Society in Revolt* (1971), Saulo, *Communism in the Philippines* (1990), and Scaff, *The Philippine Answer to Communism* (1955), as well as memoirs by Pomeroy, *The Forest* (1963); Taruc, *Born of the People* (1953) and *He Who Rides the Tiger* (1967) and Lava, *Memoirs of a Communist* (2003) ignored issues of gender and sexuality in the Huk movement, and particularly women.

3 For an in-depth treatment of the "Huk Amazon", see my book entitled, *Huk Amazons: Gender, Sex and Revolution in the Philippines* (forthcoming March 2009).

4 See Lanzona 2009 and Jeff Goodwin "The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affective Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946-1954," *American Sociological Review* 62 (February 1997)

5 Secretariat, PKP, "Revolutionary Solution of the Sex Problem," *Politburo Exhibit no. 1-15*, September 12, 1950.

6 These problems are discussed in two documents, *Politburo Exhibit O 757*, "Finance Opportunism: Its Basic Causes and Remedies," by SEC [Secretariat]. October 10, 1950. Secretariat, Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), *Politburo Exhibit no. N-1022-1026*, "The Struggle against Awaitingism," no date.

7 See Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War* (1999), Tétreault, ed. *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia and the New World* (1994) and Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memoirs of War from North Vietnam* (1998).

8 See Quinn-Judge, "Women in the Early Vietnamese Communist Movement: Sex, Lies and Liberation," *South East Asia Research* Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2001): 245-269. See also Turley, "Women in the Communist Revolution in Vietnam", *Asian Survey*, Vol 12, No. 9 (Sept 1972): 793-805.

9 See Turner 1998 and Nguyen Thi Dinh's moving memoir, *No Other Road to Take* (1976). In her wartime diary, Dang Thuy Tram (1943-1970) describes how she constantly repressed her romantic love for fellow comrades because of her fear of being reprimanded and her belief that those feelings had no place in the revolution. See *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram* (2007).

Accounts of Southeast Asian women directly engaged as military combatants are rare. While female warriors appear in the iconography of various Southeast Asian religions and folklore, and there are numerous descriptions of the non-combat roles women played in military campaigns, the history of women fighters in Southeast Asia remains largely unwritten. Geoff Wade's portrait of the enigmatic Lady Sinn (Xian fu-ren), goes some way to redress the balance.

Lady Sinn:

a 6th century woman warrior

GEOFF WADE

Lady Sinn [Xian fu-ren (洗夫人)] was a prominent Nan Yue woman known to us only by this moniker which Chinese historians assigned her. The name by which she was known within her own society will likely never be known, and all that we know of her derives from the Chinese standard histories *Sui shu* (隋書) and *Bei shi* (北史). We read first that Lady Sinn was from the most prominent of the Nan Yue clans, one which had "for generations been leaders of the Nan Yue", and which exercised control over 100,000 families in a region which is today southern Guangdong. Given that the Chinese commanderies in the region controlled only about 5,000 households, the extent to which Chinese culture was still very much a minority culture in this part of the Lingnan region is obvious.

The Nan Yue, also termed Bai Yue or Southern Yue, were the inhabitants of areas south of the Yangzi prior to Chinese expansion into these regions. Certainly they were ethnically and linguistically diverse, but textual evidence suggests that Lady Sinn would have been a speaker of some proto-Tai language, likely a precursor of Zhuang. The *Sui shu* describes these Southeast Asian peoples, to which the Southern Yue would have belonged, as having "deep-set eyes, high noses, and black curls" and the custom of cutting their hair and decorating their bodies. They also went barefoot, used a length of cloth to tie around the body, and in the winter wore robes. The women wore their hair in a pestle shape, and they sat on mats made from coconut palm. It was also noted that they produced the bronze drums so famed as 'Dong Son drums', a clear feature of Southeast Asian rather than Chinese culture.

An advantageous alliance

Unlike the short-lived Trung sisters, who had led the Vietnamese against the Chinese five centuries before her, Lady Sinn lived to a ripe old age, from c. 512 to 602 CE. In the mid-530s, a marriage took place between Lady Sinn and Feng Bao (馮寶), a descendant of the Northern Yan Chinese rulers who had fled to the south. As governor of the region, he was charged with achieving and maintaining some order on behalf of the Liang state. This allowed the Feng family, who had been unsuccessfully trying to implement Chinese rule in Lingnan, to use this new marriage alliance to institute Chinese laws and regulations among the huge number of Nan Yue people controlled by the Sinn family. From this time on, Lady Sinn became a part of the administration of the region by the Feng family.

Lady Sinn's military exploits in this role form the majority of the Chinese accounts of her life. In the 550s, aged about 40, she led military forces who attacked and captured the administrative seat where those who had rebelled against the Liang court had ensconced themselves. The death of her husband coincided with the emergence of the new Chen dynasty centred at what is today Nanjing, and Lady Sinn sent her 9 year-old son - as the head of the Nan Yue chieftains - to the Chen capital to seek some recognition. As a result, the family was assigned a title of Defenders of the Yangchun Commandery. The Sui history informs us that the Lady was involved in "cherishing" the Nan Yue, suggesting that she remained a powerful figure in the non-Chinese Lingnan firmament.

A further rebellion against Chen rule by the regional inspector of Guangzhou occurred in 570 CE and again it was Lady Sinn, now in her late fifties, who led her forces against the rebels, defeating them. This resulted in her



Modern South Chinese representation of Lady Sinn (c.512-602)

being further rewarded and enfeoffed by the Chen court, suggesting recognition of her importance in maintaining Chinese control of the Southeast Asian peoples south of the ranges. The demise of the Chen dynasty in the 580s gave rise to further disruption of the lives of people in the Lingnan region. The account informs us that the tribal peoples of Lingnan urged the Lady to lead them with the title of 'Sacred Mother'. She is then credited by the Chinese historians with assisting the incoming Sui dynasty general Wei Guang in reaching Guangzhou. Further honours were heaped upon Lady Sinn and her family members by the new Sui court.

Yet again in 590 CE, Lady Sinn sent forces to destroy another non-Chinese leader who had risen against the Sui. Although now in her late seventies, the chroniclers nevertheless advise that she still donned armour to escort the Sui envoy around the various administrations in Lingnan on horseback. The last major event in which we read of the Lady's involvement was the impeaching of a corrupt Commander-in-Chief in Panzhou (Guangzhou) in 601 CE. His depredations had reportedly led to many of the tribal people of Lingnan fleeing. The almost 90 year-old Lady was imperially commissioned to pacify the region, and by travelling to 10 administrative centres, we are informed, each was quelled by her arrival with the Imperial letter. For this, she and her deceased son Pu were rewarded. She was personally assigned 1500 households in what was likely the island of Hainan. The Lady died in a year equivalent to 602 CE.

It is quite apparent from the *Sui shu* account that Lady Sinn's husband Feng Bao was from a northern court and was Chinese, and that the Feng family used this marriage to Lady Sinn to exercise greater control over the non-Chinese people of the region. Prior to the marriage, the *Sui shu* tells us, "as they were people from another place", the Feng family's "orders were not implemented". The marriage with the dominant family among the Nan Yue was obviously a calculated policy move.

The marriage also seems to have played a certain role in bringing the Sinn family more into the Chinese world, through the children and grandchildren who could span both Chinese and Yue societies.² A grandson of Lady Sinn, Feng Ang, became a major general under the Tang dynasty, and was instrumental in helping the Tang establish and

subsequently exercise suzerainty over Lingnan. But it was obviously Lady Sinn who played a crucial role during the 6th century in subordinating the Southeast Asian societies of Lingnan to successive Chinese states.

Through her marriage to Feng Bao, Lady Sinn increasingly assumed a power that likely none of her Yue predecessors had possessed. By marrying a Chinese, and jointly participating in the magisterial functions which her husband had to perform in his official capacity, she became a functionary linking the bureaucracy of several successive Chinese states and her own tribal people. But it was her military planning and activities which were to earn her greater accolades from the Liang, Chen and Sui polities. While it was initially the Feng family which was recognised as defenders by the Liang, it gradually became apparent to the Chinese rulers that real power among the Nan Yue lay with Lady Sinn.

Administrative 'assistance'

However, this was not to be without cost to Lady Sinn's independence. A Private Secretariat was established to assist the Lady in her new administrative duties and provide her with a range of Chinese advisers. It also provided the Sui court with a further avenue for influencing and monitoring her activities. Such administrative arrangements were in fact repeated throughout Chinese expansionist history as a transitional structure by which the traditional non-Chinese rulers of newly-conquered or incorporated regions were first recognised by the Chinese state, and then guided in its ways.

During her lifetime, Lady Sinn was apparently held in high esteem by her own society as well as being respected by the Chinese people who moved into Lingnan. By the 10th century, she had been deified. Temples dedicated to Lady Sinn are today fairly numerous in the southern part of Guangdong and in Hainan Island. While a number of historical figures - Ma Yuan, Guan Di, Lin Mo/Ma-zu - have been deified in Chinese culture, there are few examples of non-Chinese persons who were so venerated (except perhaps Gautama Buddha). Was the Lady worshipped because of the role she played in assisting the Chinese states to expand to the south, or was the respect accorded to her by the Southeast Asian society she belonged to continued through the period of Sinitisation? Regardless of how we explain her deification, there can be no doubt that Lady Sinn was a major figure in both Southeast Asian and Chinese history and that she is deserving of a position among the ranks of major Southeast Asian women warriors.

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Notes

- 1 "Xian fu-ren" (洗夫人). I am here opting for the modern Cantonese pronunciation of the graph.
- 2 Much as is the case today among the people known as the "Chinese Shan" who reside in northern Burma and Yunnan.