

Mulan and Filial Piety – Lesson Plan
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Introduction

In this lesson, students will examine the relationship between gender roles and Confucian principles in pre-modern China by considering the extent to which the Mulan legend is compatible with the Confucian concept of filial piety. Students will read and discuss texts on filial piety by Confucian scholars, as well as three different works of Chinese literature based on the Mulan legend from three distinct time periods.

Grade Level: 11-12

Relevant Topics/Course Units: China (Han Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Ming Dynasty); Chinese literature; Confucianism; women's history; gender and sexuality

Duration of activity: 1 to 2 classes, total of 55-90 minutes

Content Objectives:

- To recognize and identify key features of women's social roles in pre-modern Chinese society
- To understand the relationship between gender roles and Confucian values
- To analyze the meaning of filial piety as a core Confucian value
- To examine ways in which filial piety apply to women's roles in Chinese society

Skill Objectives:

- To develop proficiency in constructing questions about textual sources
 - To develop proficiency in placing details of primary sources in specific historical context
 - To develop proficiency in examining works of fiction as historical sources
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Instructions for Class 1:

- Presentation of "Women, Gender and Family in Chinese History" PPT
 - Key points to emphasize: family (not individual) as primary unit of society; distinction between urban life of scholars, bureaucrats, etc. and life of rural population; Confucianism as a dominant school of thought in Chinese culture, filial piety as a strong component of Confucian thought
- Suggestions for introducing PPT presentation (especially for lower grade levels)
 - Ask students talk about specific responsibilities in their own families. Who does the chores (cooking, cleaning, repairing, etc.)? Who pays the bills? Who is responsible for major financial decisions (buying new furniture and appliances, for example)? Who does the grocery shopping? Who drives children in the household extracurricular activities? Ask the students if they notice a gendered pattern in household responsibilities. Ask the students to consider reasons why there is a presence (or absence) of such gendered divides among their households. Use this information to help students consider how gender relations in ancient China might be similar or different to their own experiences.
 - Show students brief clips from the Disney film, *Mulan*. Most students are already familiar with the Disney version of this Chinese legend, and should be able to comment on cultural stereotypes that they encounter in this film.

Texts to assign as student reading for homework:

1. "The Book of Filial Piety for Women Attributed to a Woman Née Zheng (ca. 730)," translated by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, in *Under Confucian Eyes Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, ed. Yu-Yin Cheng and Susan Mann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 47-69. Note that this item actually contains two Confucian texts, and should be read side by side:

- a. **“Classic of Filial Piety”**: This text was composed during the early Han Dynasty period, probably ca. 200 BCE (possibly even earlier). It was supposedly based on Confucius’ conversations with his disciple, Zengzi. In this text, Confucius clarified his views on filial piety and its role in family, community and politics.
- b. **“Book of Filial Piety for Women”**: This was a text written by a woman with the family name Zheng ca. 730 CE. This text was an adaptation of the “Classic of Filial Piety” for a female audience.

To reduce student workload, instructors can simply omit this text and have students discuss excerpts from the “Classic of Filial Piety” and “Book of Filial Piety for Women” as they appear on the “Women, Gender and Family in Chinese History” PPT.

2. **Mulan: Five Versions of a Chinese Legend with Related Texts, edited and translated by Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 1-30.** Students should read the first three selections from this text:

- a. “Poem of Mulan”: This was written by an anonymous author some time during the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 CE)
- b. “Song of Mulan”: This ballad was written by Wei Yuan Fu, a Tang dynasty official, in the middle of the 8th century CE.
- c. “The Female Mulan Joins the Army”: This play in two acts was written by Ming dynasty poet, Xu Wei (lived 1521-1593).

Instructions for Class 2:

Discuss the following questions:

1. How do the messages of the *Book of Filial Piety for Women* compare with the *Classic of Filial Piety*? What does Zheng’s text tell you about her perceptions of women’s roles at the time she lived? How did she adapt Confucius’ teachings to suit women’s roles in society?
2. How does each version of the Mulan story describe: the relationship between
 - a. the state and the subject
 - b. individual and family?
3. How does each version of the Mulan story describe
 - a. Mulan’s act of fighting
 - b. Mulan’s dress or appearance?
4. Comment on the similarities and differences between these three different versions of the Mulan legend. What do you think are the core themes and messages that connect these versions shared? What factors do you think account for the differences? Do you think the differences in these three different versions of the legend tell us something about changes to women’s position in Chinese society? Why/why not?
 - a. Hints: “Song of Mulan” was composed around the same time as when the “Book of Filial Piety for Women” was composed. Also, note that the Ming dynasty play references foot binding. The audience would have recognized that a woman who had her foot bound could not possibly reverse that process in order to pose as a man in the military. Why was this detail included in the play?
5. During the Ming dynasty, there were no female actors. “The Female Mulan Joins the Army” would have been performed by an entirely male cast. What do you make of this?
6. Do you think Confucius would consider Mulan’s story to be a good example of filial piety? Why/why not?
7. How well do you think the Disney film *Mulan* captures the core messages in these three Mulan legends you have read?