

3 Qiu Jin

Transitioning from traditional swordswoman to feminist warrior

For centuries, women war fighters like Hua Mulan have featured prominently in China's literary, dramatic and historical texts and the woman warrior icon proved hugely popular with mass audiences. Yet curiously, as we saw in the previous chapter, such stories of fighting women operated in a cultural context where women, to use Qiu Jin's words, 'are prisoners our entire lives, and beasts of burden for half of it'.¹ The patriarchal and oftentimes misogynistic social order of dynastic China produced and sustained the martial female image in a complex discourse that nurtured the contradictions between idealised submissive women and romanticised powerful women. This resilient cultural tradition produced a situation in 1907 in which Qiu Jin (1875–1907) could describe her countrywomen as 'still perishing in the darkest and lowest of the eighteen layers of Buddhist hell without showing any desire to climb even one level'² despite viewing dramas and hearing tales featuring strong, sword-wielding, fearless fighting women. Why? Because for centuries, China's women warriors, like Mulan, were exemplars of consolidation and defenders of orthodoxy.³

Over the three decades of Qiu Jin's short life the woman warrior would assume new significances as a result of feminist notions of equal rights for men and women that flooded into China from Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The one-time diverting cross-dressing, magical swordswoman who avenged her brother, replaced her father and defended her lord and master in countless opera stages around the country was confronted by Qiu Jin – a knife-wielding, gun-toting *feminist* warrior who explicitly identified the male-dominated gender hierarchy as unjust and sought to overthrow it. As she wrote in one of her impassioned essays, 'The man always assumes the position of power and the woman the position of slave. . . . Alas! Dearest Sisters, no one in any other country would willingly bear the sobriquet "slave", so why should we carry it with such docility and without feeling its shame.'⁴

Qiu Jin's incorporation of a feminist political platform into the existing woman warrior narratives was undoubtedly inspirational at the start of the

twentieth century. In China, feminism emerges as a militaristic movement at the hands of Qiu Jin. At this point China's elites were seeking to recover their country's international strength after the Qing dynasty's (1644–1911) imperial rulers demonstrated their incompetence time and again in the face of European, American and Japanese economic and military might. Rebels like Qiu Jin wanted to overthrow the monarchy and establish a republic. Strengthening women's capacities was central to this anti-Qing revolution. Some in China's educated elite, newly aware of women's rights, regarded the preponderance of women warriors in China's history as evidence of their nation's advanced status. Qiu Jin's friend, publisher Chen Yiyi (fl. 1909), argued that China's martial heroines like Hua Mulan were superior to western and Japanese women because the former could only indirectly serve their countries and the latter could only support their husband's careers.⁵ China's reformers and rebels, like Chen and Qiu, saw a model for feminism and hope for China's future in the beloved stock icon of ancient swordswomen. Qiu Jin presented herself to her late Qing public as a classically virtuous woman warrior in the mode of the female swordswoman of the knight errant tradition, but one bearing the promise of a modern, independent womanhood of a re-strengthened China. The female swordswoman, long-time defender of patriarchy, would be sent out to battle for women's rights and republican nationhood in the form of Qiu Jin.

However, the iconic figure of the woman warrior carried a complex array of social meanings – not all of which could be easily controlled in a battle against patriarchy. The resilience of the ancient women warrior virtues meant that Qiu Jin's feminist aspirations were easily overlooked. The knight errant traditionally roamed the land alone righting wrongs and reminding the people of core virtues of loyalty, justice, courage and personal sacrifice. In drawing on this image Qiu Jin invoked virtues that would mark her as the first and last feminist knight errant. Later female war fighters actively rejected Qiu Jin's knight errantry in favour of professional soldiering. The lone, unconventional swordswoman of great courage and righteousness that Qiu Jin evoked in her life and death would be eliminated as a martial ideal, except as a fantasy figure in popular culture, almost as soon as the Republic of China (ROC) was formed in 1912. This chapter examines Qiu Jin's radical role in a period of violence and destruction as she consciously crafted a persona for herself and presented it to a population bathed in traditional conceptions of warlike female heroes from mass culture, and to her literati peers schooled in Confucian ideals of martyrdom for righteous causes. Her desire to prompt change in attitudes about women's capacities and rights would be restricted by the weight of these traditions and her enthusiasm for using these topoi in propagandising for her cause.

Hu Ying describes her as 'a "transitional figure" *par excellence*: a history of women of traditional China typically ends with her while a study of modern

women begins with her. It is as if alongside her the last of [the] "talented women" (*caini*) was buried and through her the New Woman (*xin nüxing*) was heralded in.⁶ But, as the various women discussed in this book show, her death also marked the end of a particular type of woman warrior for China – later female soldiers would not be witnesses to her values or sentiments. Qiu Jin fought to change women's roles and status, and in so doing rendered redundant many of the very attributes of heroic women that she had invoked to build her fame. She lived during the last years of public glorifying of suicidal, sacrificial, chaste women. Her self-presentation – knowing that early death was inevitable – sought to prompt public sympathy for her and her anti-Qing feminism by mobilising age-old, gendered rhetoric about a heroic death for a noble cause. She deliberately waited to be captured rather than fleeing, courting execution in a decision that was embedded in the political culture of her times. Only a decade-and-a-half after her execution-*cum*-suicide, this noble suicide ideal was discredited and the warlike women that succeeded her, like Xie Bingying discussed in the following chapter, specifically argued against Qiu Jin's actions. Bingying eschewed martyrdom and suicide, regarding them as relics of old patriarchal values. Qiu Jin's story and its commemoration marks a turning point not only in the ideology of women's education and women's learning, as identified by Hu Ying, but also in the ideology underpinning gender and war – her life and deeds reflect views and social norms that would quickly be considered futile, defeatist and vainglorious.

Qiu Jin's attitude to militarised violence was at once traditional in her invocation of swordswomen but also very modern in her repeated advocacy of the importance for China to build a strong, disciplined army that garnered respect at home and abroad – and Qiu Jin's desired modern armed forces would include women. She compared Chinese soldiers unfavourably to their Japanese and European counterparts, describing them as dejected 'pitiful creatures who scraped together a few coppers and some grain in wages . . . [and] regarded their barrack commanders as rats would eye cats'.⁷ In battle, confronted with a proud and well-trained enemy, these men faced certain defeat. To save China from dismemberment and deliver prosperity to the land her troops needed to be educated and funded. She sought to change the Chinese elite's attitudes not only to women's status but also to the value of soldiering and organised militarisation.⁸ Qiu Jin, herself, was part of the rebel Guangfu army that would overthrow the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty. The rebel's black and white flag bore the character 'Han' – signifying the ethnic war against the Manchu by their Han subjects.⁹ Qiu Jin's poems and essays are replete with militaristic imagery of swords and knives, battles of courage and passionate patriots with iron for bones. Neither women nor soldiers deserved disdain, and reform of both was vital to China's survival.

During Qiu Jin's parents' lifetime, China experienced the British and French attacks of the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1860s that crippled the Qing government. New military and economic surges threatened to crush the monarchy altogether. In Qiu Jin's view, by mobilising women to the patriotic cause and advancing the status and capacities of women, China might have a chance of survival. China's Manchu-led government was in disarray in the face of foreign gunboats and her society was crumbling before the impact of floods of opium and foreign manufactured products – the time was ripe for foundational social change. For Qiu Jin, foreigners of all forms, including the Manchu, had to be overthrown. She sought to inspire faith among Han Chinese about their capacities writing: 'My fellow Chinese are inherently superior, so why is it so difficult to surpass these white people?'¹⁰ The woman warrior and swordswoman of the popular imagination was called into being to act on the stage of the real-life battle between Manchu and Han, Chinese and foreigners. Her ancestral land, she wrote, had sunk so low under Manchu rule that its very existence was at stake.

Invaded by foreign aggression,
And corrupt and rotten within,
Without a manly hero to take the lead.
Heaven, you're so blind:
Can you bear to see these rivers and mountains
In the possession of foreign barbarians?
Divided up like beans, cut up like a melon –
It is all our land of old!¹¹

On Qiu Jin's reckoning, women of courage like the women warriors of China's ancient past were needed to save their country and their sex. 'Now we must! Must! Must send out the troops! Wipe out the poisonous fog to see the clear sky. Raising a white sword in our hands, seeking out those who would betray the people, sacrificing life and limb to save the people is a sure and sacred act!'¹²

Qiu Jin's life and times

In 1906, Qiu Jin, a 30-year-old mother of two, injured her hand while making bombs with her comrade would-be assassins. Their intended targets were the hated Qing government officials. Calling for blood, death and sacrifice in myriad poems, essays and songs Qiu Jin was martyred the following year – acutely aware that with her execution she had become the first *female* hero (*nü yingxiong*) to do so. While there were other women who engaged in paramilitary plots and formed women's armies, they were few in number and exceptions to the norm. Many of these women were her personal friends and fellow members of Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance – a rebel group fighting to

overthrow not only the Qing dynasty, but also monarchy as a system of government. The establishment of a democratic republic was their goal – one that would be realised in 1912, three years after Qiu Jin's execution.

There is no doubt that Qiu Jin was exceptional and that the historical context in which she operated was unique. The Qing Court was fractured with political intrigue and failed to quell increasing social unrest. The majority ethnic Han literati began mobilising the population against the Manchu ruling class through an emotionally charged racist rhetoric. Both posed serious challenges to the Manchu hereditary line that had governed China since 1644. After two-and-a-half centuries of rule, the height of which saw peaks in China's international prestige and domestic prosperity, the country was in chaos and faced both internal rebellion and external attack.

The Qing Court was forced to flee Beijing in a humiliating fashion after declaring war on 'foreigners' in support of an anti-Christian rebel groups called the Boxers, so named for their belief in the magical powers of Chinese martial arts. The court's support of the Boxers provoked military reprisals from Austria-Hungary, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Japan, Germany, Italy, France and Russia. The 'Eight Powers' quickly crushed the Boxers and their Qing army and rampaged through the capital after their 'relief' of the foreign legation diplomatic quarter. The legations had been under siege for fifty-five days between June and August of 1900 before the 'Eight Powers' came to their rescue.¹³ Legation residents had reason to fear for their lives since the Boxers had been responsible for the deaths of many missionaries around North China in the preceding months. The Qing government had reached a new nadir with its misguided support of the Boxers and many Han around the country saw this, including Qiu Jin.

She was roused to action – action that would lead her to abandon her safe but dull domestic world for the excitement and uncertainty of military rebellion. She expressed her despair at the events of 1900 in a poem – its lines presaged the cross-dressing warrior woman role that she would soon assume.

When will the flames of war in the north finally be extinguished?
It is said that the battle between China and the west will never end.
The woman from Qishi frets for her country but in vain;
It is difficult to change women's dress to military attire.¹⁴

The poem's frustration belies the comparatively privileged life that Qiu Jin lived as a member of the literati elite. Born in the southern province of Fujian she was raised in the family home in Xiamen, where her grandfather had served as Prefect responsible for coastal defence, and in their ancestral home in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. She received an excellent education in both literature and the martial arts from a family that valued women's talents. Her feet had been bound, but 'perhaps not very tightly' and ultimately she 'matured

into a talented, unconventional, and strong-willed young woman, accustomed to having her own way'.¹⁵

Her freedom ended with her marriage in 1896 at the relatively late age of 21. Her husband, Wang Tingjun, was a merchant from Hunan Province, and the unhappy marriage produced two children, a son Wang Yuande (1897–1955) and a daughter Wang Canzhi (1901–1967).¹⁶ Qiu Jin performed the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother in comparative seclusion from the world, as was customary for women of her class, but wrote frequently of her melancholy. She expressed to her brother her despair and loneliness: 'In the boudoir, no understanding companions; Who can accompany me in my spare hours?... Regrettably, there is no understanding person; realising this, I shed more tears.'¹⁷

In 1903, she left Hunan and her parents-in-law's household when her husband purchased a position in the imperial bureaucracy and moved the family to Beijing. Once in the capital, Qiu Jin joined progressive political groups. She and her friends read books about life outside of China and spoke regularly about national affairs. But her marriage was still problematic. Her husband was interested in profit and leisure while she sought personal fame, poetry and politics. Tensions increased and her husband sought to take a concubine. Qiu Jin's loathing of her husband is apparent in another letter to her brother dated 19 June 1905: 'That person's behaviour is worse than an animal's... he treats me as less than nothing.'¹⁸

Qiu Jin's appreciation of the broader political implications of her personal predicament fuelled her enthusiasm for feminism. She formed a 'Natural Foot Society' to oppose footbinding and spoke publicly about the importance of expanding women's educational opportunities.¹⁹ Her famous friendship with calligrapher, poet and reformist intellectual Wu Zhiying (1867–1934) started at this time – Wu would play a significant role in building and sustaining 'the Qiu Jin myth' after her execution. Qiu Jin's patriotism and feminism quickly matured, leaving her dissatisfied with the role of 'arm-chair activist' – she sought to make a direct contribution to ensuring the survival of her country and its rescue from Manchu hands.

In 1904 she embarked on the path that would shorten her life but ensure her a lasting place in the history of China's twentieth-century revolutions. She sold her jewellery, left her children and husband, and bought a boat ticket to Tokyo – a key base for anti-Qing rebels. Her mother and brothers, themselves attuned to progressive politics, supported her decision and provided additional funds and encouragement.²⁰ Her decision was a feminist act that declared the right of women to determine their own fate rather than obey their husbands. Her most famous poem of this moment directly expresses her feminist motivation. Titled 'Regrets: Lines Written *En Route* to Japan', it runs:



Figure 3.1 Qiu Jin dressed in Japanese style with sword

Sun and moon have no more light; earth is dark.
 Our woman's world has sunk so deep; who can help us?
 Jewellery sold to pay for this trip across the seas,
 Cut off from my family, I leave my native land.
 Unbinding my feet, I clean out a thousand years of poison,
 Alas this delicate kerchief here
 Is half stained with blood, and half with tears.²¹

Her decision to depart was also a patriotic act since it declared her personal war on the Manchu state. And she would soon become a serious threat to the Qing government.

In Tokyo she joined the hundreds of other Chinese students and political activists working to restore China to its former grandeur. Japan was not only geographically close but its rapid rise in military and industrial capacities greatly impressed those Chinese looking for a programme to reinvigorate their own country. Japan's 1895 defeat of China's military confirmed that Japan had something to teach the lumbering giant that was China. Among her friends in Tokyo were women activists such as Tang Qunying, who led the Chinese women's suffrage movement, Chen Xiefen who was one of China's earliest anti-Qing journalists, and He Zhen a leading anarchist.²² All were firm in their hatred of the Manchu. She became active in the militant secret societies from her home province of Zhejiang and joined the Revolutionary Alliance that would propel Sun Yat-sen to his position as founding president of the ROC in 1912.

Inspired by the increasing radicalism of her fellow students and their expanding skills in explosives and military strategy she decided to return to China in early 1906. Sun Yat-sen circulated his general strategies for the revolution in the winter of that year and specifically contrasted his new-style troops against the old-style rebels of China's past dynastic changes. 'In the past we had revolutions of heroes, but today we have a revolution of the citizenry' and the citizen revolutionaries will have 'the spirit of freedom, equality and fraternity and each will bear responsibility for the revolution'.²³ Qiu Jin envisaged herself as one of these citizens, equal to men and charged with expanding the corps of individuals ready to join the anti-Qing cause. On her return to China she strengthened her ties with the underground movement and like many others combined her revolutionary work with teaching and publishing.

She edited the short-lived *Chinese Women's Journal* – recognised today as one of China's earliest feminist magazines – and secured teaching positions in various new girls' schools including the Datong School in her hometown, Shaoxing. The radical Xu Xilin (1873–1907), with whom she had studied in Japan, established the school and apart from promoting a modern education for women, he intended it to foment anti-Manchu dissent. Qiu Jin became its principal and from this base built her women's army. The curriculum at Datong was modern, physical and warlike. The students trained in foreign languages (including English and Japanese), geography, history and military strategy and undertook a rigorous physical education programme that focused on military drills and weaponry skills.²⁴ Many of her students had undertaken the painful process of unbinding their feet in order to participate in these training regimes. Children living around the school sat and watched the women during their drills with 'foreign rifles' and crowded around Qiu Jin as she rode horseback about Shaoxing dressed in men's clothes and western leather shoes.²⁵

She and her rebel cell promoted anti-Qing sentiment and plotted the assassinations of government officials in Henan and Zhejiang but their plans were cut short by her arrest. When Xu Xilin failed in his bid to assassinate the provincial governor of Anhui, the Qing government had sufficient cause to issue a warrant for Qiu Jin's arrest – since she was the principal of Xu's school. News of Xu's arrest and execution reached Shaoxing ahead of the Qing troops, giving Qiu Jin sufficient time to escape, but she had chosen a martyr's path. Qiu Jin resolved to remain at Datong School and await her executioners – her death, she correctly anticipated, would generate further anti-Qing sentiment. While awaiting their arrival, she wrote a final letter to one of her sworn sisters, Xu Yunhua, expressing her 'determination to die for the revolutionary cause'.²⁶

Her colleague from Datong school later cited Qiu Jin: 'I am a pure and spotless woman and haven't committed the slightest crime, so why should I run away and provide people with an excuse to accuse me of fleeing like a coward!' More than 400 Qing troops arrived to arrest Qiu Jin, surrounding the school to prevent her escape. When her students tried to flee 'many were killed by gunfire'.²⁷ This appears to be the only time the troops she trained faced live fire.

During her short imprisonment and hasty trial she maintained her innocence of any crimes. Instead she argued that her school was well integrated into the Shaoxing community and that the local judicial and government authorities regularly visited for ceremonial functions, had donated funds and even approved the purchase of rifles for military drills. She maintained the position that she was simply running a school that trained women in a modern education curriculum. Her association with Xu Xilin should not be a problem since 'Even though this school may have been founded by Xu Xilin, he is only one of the old teachers, so why should the [current] teachers of the school be implicated in this case?'²⁸

Many later reports of her imprisonment say that she was tortured to extract a confession but none was forthcoming so her many published poems were the sole evidence that the authorities could muster to convict her. She was executed at dawn on 15 July 1907 by beheading – the morning after her arrest. Florence Ayscough aptly wrote that Qiu Jin's death was 'fecund'.²⁹ Despite the failure of the revolution during her life, her death deepened discontent against the Manchus. The controversy over her hasty and poorly managed trial and execution caused serious problems for the Qing officials involved. The press, ranging from the moderate *Shibao* and *Shenbao* to the revolutionary *Shenzhou ribao*, presented Qiu rather romantically as a wronged woman and the extensive media coverage of her life and death was overwhelmingly sympathetic.³⁰ While some believed she was innocent of all charges, others recognised her crimes but felt that the trial was mismanaged and its verdict excessively harsh.

Many in the government were annoyed that the actions of their Zhejiang colleagues had stirred up more unrest in a country already boiling with anti-Qing discontent. Mary Rankin explains that the careers of the officials responsible for her execution were ended by the controversy and the magistrate who sentenced her to execution committed suicide.³¹

Her fame was not limited to the Chinese language press. The Shanghai-based English-language *North China Herald* reported on both Xu Xilin's execution (his heart was cut out and his head displayed on a spike)³² and included a lengthy article on Qiu Jin – her life, bungled trial and hasty execution. The *Herald* presents the view that she was not an anti-Manchu revolutionary at all and had no knowledge of the charges that were being brought against her. Describing her as 'heroic' in the face of torture and 'perfectly loyal' in her refusal to name any co-conspirators, the paper disdainfully described the Qing officials as 'miserable' and 'panic-stricken' at the prospect of rebellion in their jurisdiction.³³

So prominent did she become after her death that she was buried and reburied nine times as national and personal politics invested in or attempted to control the power of commemoration. Sabine Hieronymus aptly describe the journey of her body as 'an odyssey'.³⁴ Fear of persecution meant that at first, no family claimed her severed head and body so a charitable association buried Qiu Jin in the hills outside the town. In October, several months after her execution her brother retrieved her coffin and reburied her in Shaoxing. Only a few months later again, in January of 1908, her sworn sisters Wu Zhiying and Xu Zhihua (1873–1935) travelled to Shaoxing, retrieved her remains and secretly moved her to a plot they had bought for the purpose at Hangzhou's West Lake. This shift honoured Qiu Jin's wishes to be buried next to the national hero, Yue Fei, who fought to defend the Han-dominated Song dynasty (960–1279) against the invading Mongols who would later form the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368).³⁵ A ceremony, including the erection of a stele in her honour, marked the occasion. In December 1908, however, the increasingly anxious Qing government instructed her brother to take the body back to Shaoxing, fearing the Hangzhou location near Yue Fei's tomb would provoke unrest. In autumn of 1909 her son Wang Yuande, then only aged 14, obeyed his recently-deceased father's wishes that Qiu Jin be buried in the Wang family plot in Hunan and so her remains were relocated yet again. Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 her coffin was moved to the hills of Changsha and then in 1913 returned to lakeside Hangzhou where, after yet another relocation to the hills in 1965, she returned for the last time in 1981. Today tourists still visit her resting place on the lakeside at Hangzhou.

Her public prominence increased after her death, in no small part thanks to Wu Zhiying and Xu Zhihua – both women were Qiu's close personal friends and dedicated considerable time to promoting her causes through writing about

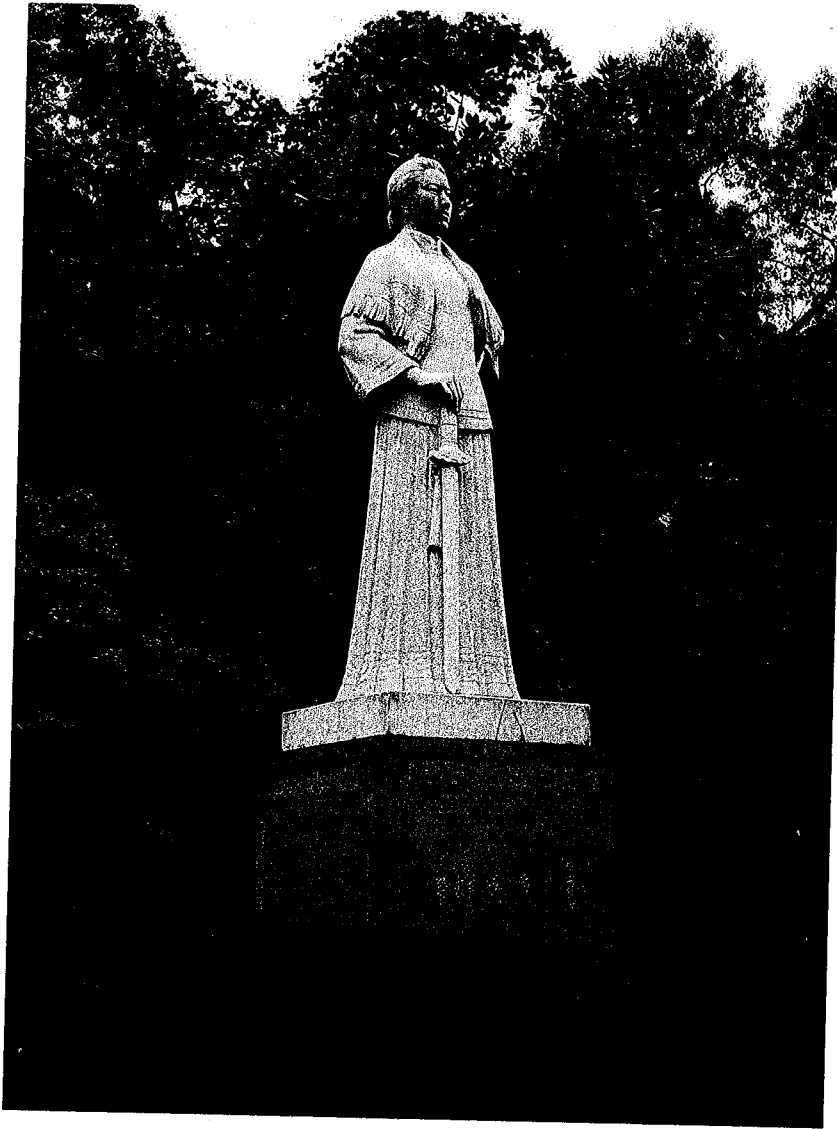


Figure 3.2 Qiu Jin statue in Hangzhou, 2009

her life and deeds. Broader public fascination with the now-dead woman warrior meant there was demand for information about Qiu Jin in the regular press as well. In the first year of the new republic, 1912, and five years after her death, Sabine Hieronymus declares that 'the Qiu Jin cult had reached its

zenith'. Freed of earlier fears that the Qing government would persecute attendees, a memorial ceremony was held in Hangzhou and over a thousand guests attended. Schools were established in her name and Sun Yat-sen visited her gravesite penning an elegiac calligraphic scroll with the words 'Female Hero' (*Jinguo yingxiong*). In writing this term, a centuries-old classical phrase used to honour women warriors, Sun, despite his desire for a citizens' revolution and not a heroes' revolution, situated Qiu Jin within the ideology of noble swordswomen of China's past rather than as a revolutionary citizen in which feminists could be part of China's future.

Becoming a swordswoman to become a feminist nationalist

In today's terms, Qiu Jin was a terrorist. She advocated and prepared for the violent overthrow of her government. Yet, as we saw above, reports on her execution reveal her to be extremely sympathetically regarded. This positive appraisal has been sustained for decades through to the present and results in part from her conscious self-crafting as a classic female swordswoman. Hu Ying and Sabine Hieronymus have traced the mechanisms through which she engaged the woman warrior heroine tradition.³⁶ Hieronymus explains: 'The heroine Qiu Jin had a very good working knowledge of the old myths of her culture, she knew how they worked and instrumentalized them – and thus created a myth of her own. . . and by doing so, deliberately placed herself in the tradition of Chinese heroines.'³⁷ Similarly, Mary Rankin described her behaviour as being 'closely tied to the image of the hero, which had already crept into her early poetry and now became the model about which she sought to organize her life'.³⁸ Wu Zhiying dedicated considerable time and energy to present Qiu Jin posthumously as a 'knight errant' in order to commemorate her unusual friend in a recognisable, positive frame.³⁹ She too positioned Qiu Jin as a lone hero rather than a radical, feminist terrorist.

The 'knight errant' is a stock figure in Chinese literary and historical traditions. They possess advanced martial skill and, according to James Liu, are marked by the following attributes: altruism, a strong sense of justice, valuing individual freedom highly and rejecting conventional morality, personal loyalty, physical and moral courage, truthfulness and a commitment to fulfilling promises, the cherishing of honour and the desire for fame and generosity coupled with a disdain for the trappings of wealth.⁴⁰ The historical figures he discusses are male but in his discussion of knights from fiction and drama women also feature. The romance of a swordswoman of superior skill adhering to the highest moral (masculine) codes had huge popular appeal.⁴¹

Qiu Jin actively sought to present herself as a female knight errant (*nixia*). She uses the term *xia* frequently in her poems to describe herself and her pen name was 'The Female knight errant from the Mirror Lake' (*Jianhu nixia*).

Rankin described her youth as being 'engaged in romantic dreams of knight errantry fed by swashbuckling novels, and to have learned to ride horseback, use a sword, and drink considerable quantities of wine'.⁴² Her poems also display her interest in China's historical and fictional amazons. In 'Full River Red' she writes 'The memory of Qin Liangyu's fame soaks my gown with tears; At the thought of Shen Yunying's deeds my heart starts to pound.'⁴³ Wife to a Sichuanese general, Qin Liangyu (1574–1648) took command of his troops after his death in battle. Shen Yunying (1624–1660) was daughter to a heroic Ming general and also assumed command of his troops after his death in the successful defence of Daozhou city in 1643. Significantly both women fought the Manchu, just as Qiu Jin herself aspired to do. ❁

Qiu Jin harnessed the power of these popular women to increase public sympathy. She regularly carried a sword or a knife and made much show of her skills in their use. Many are the reports of her performances of martial arts sword dances. She was not averse to more aggressive uses of knives either. During one of her famous Tokyo speeches of December 1905 aimed at prompting students to return to China to join the anti-Qing revolution, Qiu Jin used a knife as prop – some reports saying she stabbed it into the podium's table and others that she threw it onto the table while threatening death by sword for all those who failed the anti-Qing rebel movement. Qiu Jin's friend, Xu Shuangyu, said that she told the audience 'anyone who sides with the Manchus, sells out friends to pursue glory, or bullies the Han people after their return to the fatherland will take a stabbing from me!'⁴⁴

Although the anti-Qing revolutionaries worked mostly with rifles and explosives the romance of the sword and knife was central to the creation of Qiu Jin as a female knight errant. One of her more famous poems is 'Song of the Precious Sword' in which she invokes the power of the sword as a historical symbol of revolt against poor leadership and as a contemporary symbol calling for the taking up of arms.

When the allied troops of the eight powers marched north,
We again handed our mountains and rivers over to others.
Those white devils coming from the West serve as a bell,
That woke us Chinese up from our slaves' dream!
You, my lord, gave me this gold-speckled sword,
Today as I receive it, my mind is virile and brave.
These are the days when red-hot iron rules,
And a million heads are not worth a feather.
Bathed by the sun and moon, shinier than jewels:
Risking my life, I am suddenly filled with elation.
I swear I'll find us a way to lead us from death to life:
World peace now depends on military armament.⁴⁵

She continues her poem with emotive lyrics on the sword's power.

A precious sword, heroic bones: who is our equal?
All my life I've known who are my enemies and friends.
Don't despise this foot-long iron for not being brave:
The rare merit of saving the nation is yours to garner!
Could I but use heaven and earth as my oven, and yin and yang as my coal, and
gathering all the iron of the six continents,
Produce thousands, tens of thousands of precious swords to purify this sacred
land,
And continuing the glorious power and fame of our first ancestor, the Yellow
Emperor,
Cleanse once and for all what, in its thousand-, its hundred-year-long history,
has been its vilest shame!⁴⁶

This song encapsulates another key feature of Qiu Jin knight errant identity – her capacity for huge personal sacrifice. Qiu Jin, in her self-conscious creation of a heroic identity and her welcoming of capture and execution, saw herself as more powerful in death than in life. She was inspired by the perceived noble status she would achieve on her martyrdom and spoke approvingly of others' heroic deaths. Hu Ying explains that the willingness to die for one's principles is a deep-seated and well-known Confucian principle – the truly great person does not seek to preserve his or her life if it means compromising virtue or righteousness.⁴⁷ Hu Ying argues that such martyrdom then demanded a eulogistic response from those positioned as the audience for the martyr's sacrifice. It was precisely this reaction that Qiu Jin sought in her self-presentation as a female knight errant.

In the late Qing, replete as it was with rebels of strong principles, Qiu Jin had many direct role models of martyrdom. In 1898, Tan Sitong (1865–1898) refused to flee from the Qing police after the reform movement he helped spearhead was foiled. Two of his colleagues, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Kang Youwei (1858–1927), fled Beijing for Japan but Tan chose martyrdom – advancing their cause among Han literati by displaying his steadfastness to the reform movement and purity of political intention. Similarly, Qiu Jin's friend in Japan, Chen Tianhua (1875–1905), had walked into the sea committing suicide in protest at the Japanese government's increasing restrictions on Chinese students' political activities. Qiu Jin even saw accidental deaths as praiseworthy and ennobling. Wu Yue (1875–1905), died after accidentally blowing himself up during an assassination mission against five Qing officials. Qiu Jin wrote an obituary declaring his death 'pure sacrifice'.⁴⁸ The courage to die for one's principles was a key attribute for those joining the anti-Qing movement. The population positioned as audience for these acts of public sacrifice were ideally roused to sympathy for their cause or at least to enormous respect for the individual who had so courageously demonstrated his/her virtue. Tan Sitong had also explicitly invoked the knight errant image for its capacity

to arouse the people to action.⁴⁹ Qiu Jin would be the last woman warrior to present herself so purely as a classical martyr.

Such was the moral and political context in which Qiu Jin operated. She wrote explicitly of her willingness to die for her cause in a 1905 letter to a friend, Wang Shize, declaring that since the Boxer calamity of 1900 she had already resolved to put her life on the line. She listed the many men who had martyred themselves for the anti-Qing cause, like Tang Caichang (1867–1900) and Wu Yue, but noted that, much to the shame of the ‘women’s world’, there was no female equivalent yet.⁵⁰ She offered herself for this role with the pledge ‘I vow to give all of you encouragement.’⁵¹

Her enthusiasm to be a female version of Tang Caichang did not, however, mean she entirely abandoned the audience’s expectation that martyred women worthy of emulation reflect long-standing ideals of female chastity. In Qiu Jin’s embracing of a violent death she was acutely aware of the importance of appearing morally ‘clean’ in order to be an effective martyr. She wrote to her brother from Japan saying ‘What I care about is that when I am dead and buried my name will be handed down through 10,000 generations.’ For this to happen she had to prevent those who ‘would damage her future reputation’ from gaining any advantage – that is, her husband Wang Zifeng. Qiu Jin declared, ‘I will definitely never allow that immoral one, Zifang to pollute my heroic spirit of independence.’⁵² Other letters to relatives likewise express her concern at slander and gossip that would sully her ‘lofty aspirations’.⁵³

Female chastity and virtue were long-standing markers of community virtue and female knights errant, despite their daring, still needed to demonstrate purity. Moreover, during the two preceding centuries China had seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of women ‘publicly performing virtue’ through suicide or chaste widowhood – events that were documented in reports to government on significant events in each locality and sometimes even commemorated with the construction of huge memorial arches. A chaste and virtuous woman brought respect to the community – suicide was one method of demonstrating these qualities.⁵⁴

Her friend Xu Zhihua supported her desire to be remembered as pure of heart in writing the stele for Qiu’s 1908 burial site. Xu explained Qiu’s unusual behaviour as follows: ‘In closely examining [Qiu Jin’s] conduct, [we see that] she was careless of details, tended to give free expression to her emotions, and loved wine and swords – all as if she were not to be reined in by convention. Yet, in her true essence, she was exceptionally upright and prudent. . . Although she loved freedom, in matters concerning propriety, she never transgressed.’⁵⁵

Not everyone was convinced that she ‘never, from first to last, overstepped the bounds of morality and virtue’⁵⁶ – and rumours about her relationship with Xu Xilin undercut her friends’ professions of Qiu’s chaste spirit. She wrote several poems about him and his heroism once she arrived in Japan and no other

living figure features so frequently in her poetry.⁵⁷ Even those on the same side of the battle as Qiu were not entirely convinced of her feminine virtue. Prominent leader of the anti-Qing movement, Zhang Binglin (1868–1936, aka Zhang Taiyan), wrote a preface for her collected poems and criticised her garrulousness – she talked too much and gave too many speeches in public to be a truly virtuous woman. He writes approvingly of her sword skills but less positively of her failure to adhere to a key principle of female virtue – ‘prudence in words’. ‘I heard that in ancient times, those who were good in swordsmanship held true spirit within and exhibited placid appearance without. Few were garrulous.’⁵⁸ One of Qiu Jin’s most famous essays is her 1904 ‘The Advantages of Public Speaking’ where she declared that ‘an eloquent and honest tongue’⁵⁹ could mobilise the masses and, based on Zhang’s critique, she clearly practiced what she preached.

The idea that a woman such as Qiu Jin who abandoned her children, rejected her husband and wandered the world independently in apparent disregard for feminine propriety could aspire to anything approximating *virtue* is entirely contradictory – at least on the surface. But, as Hu Ying so deftly explains, this contradiction could be managed within the ideal of the noble warrior knight errant, the *xia*. As a female version of this noble figure, Qiu Jin could be excused her unconventional behaviour. Knights errant were known for rejecting conventional norms in order to achieve higher goals. Qiu Jin, in large part through her friend Wu Zhiying’s carefully constructed biographies, emerges as a legitimate knight errant. Her unusual and unfeminine behaviour becomes noble and worthy of commemoration and exaltation through this well-recognised social role. She is unorthodox but understandable within the established cultural system. In this respect the radical nature of her claims for changing the foundation of gender roles is tamed – she is presented as an unusual woman in unusual times and a stock figure throughout China’s cultural history.

The knights errant’s rejection of conventional morality typically leads others to misunderstand their motives or find them problematic. While in Beijing before embarking on her Japan adventure Qiu Jin wrote of her loneliness at being misunderstood by lesser human beings. But, despite the frequent mournful tone of many of her poems, Qiu Jin equally frequently declares her courage to fight for change in China’s miserable circumstances. In the second verse to her ‘Full River Red’ she wrote:

My body will not allow me
To mingle with the 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?

In adversity the hero must suffer troubles and woes.
Where in this world of red dust can I find a true friend?
My blue gown is soaked with tears.⁶⁰

In self-consciously presenting herself as a female knight errant Qiu Jin was making sense of her own actions within the standard conceptualisations available to her and these were also connections that others viewing her actions would readily grasp. However, like the women knights errant of yesteryear, she also had to become a man temporarily to achieve her goals.

Becoming a man to become a soldier

Qiu Jin was famous for her propensity to dress in men's clothing. She left photographs and poetic commentary on her dress choice as part of her presentation as a noble swordswoman. Cross-dressing as men was a key trait of the traditional women warriors and was central to their allure. To be effective, heroic soldiers they had to first pass as men. War fighting and the social role of soldier were ascribed to men at the exclusion of women. The other key public role, that of the scholar, was also denied to females and deemed the exclusive preserve of men and masculinity. Women were prohibited from sitting the imperial examinations that selected the bureaucrat literati who would rule the country and hold moral authority as their nation's political leaders. Nor could they join the military examinations that selected the officer elite let alone be conscripted or volunteer for battle as regular soldiers. That is, the roles of scholar and soldier were denied to women unless they assumed the persona of men – and the key method for achieving this was through dressing as a man. Women, like Hua Mulan, passed as men to fulfil masculine military social roles. Others, like the protagonists in the popular and well-loved stories of Huang Chonggu and Zhu Yingtai, dressed as men to become scholars.⁶¹ By dressing as men, such women did not upset the gender hierarchy in which masculinity and maleness were integral to legitimate scholars or soldiers. Such women usually returned to their feminine social roles – their adventures being a sojourn that confirmed the matrix where the social roles of scholar and soldier could only be mapped onto the male form.

Soon after her arrival in Beijing she became known for her public appearances dressed as a man – variously in Chinese or western clothing. From the autumn of 1903, after a particularly nasty episode with her husband, she resolved to dress as a man and wear no cosmetics. Her rejection of traditional female attire marked her rebirth as a political and military being. On an inscription to one of the many photos she had taken of herself dressed as a man, she wrote that the clothing reflected the arrival of this new person and the eradication of her former self. The poem shows how she believed her female



Figure 3.3 Qiu Jin dressed in Chinese men's clothing

body had to be disavowed as fake before she could take on the task of saving her nation's future. Using Buddhist notions of reincarnation she implies that in a previous life she had been a man – who unfortunately found himself reborn as a woman – but at least a woman who can recognise her masculine alternative core.

'Inscription on My Photo – in men's clothing'
 Who is this person, staring at me so sternly?
 The martial bones from a former existence regret their female embodiment.
 The flesh of this world is from the start a deception,
 The land of the future, surely, is real.
 You and I should have been together long ago, to share our feelings;
 Looking out and lamenting these difficult times, our spirits garner strength.
 When you see my friends from the old days,
 Tell them I've scrubbed off all that old mud.⁶²

Mary Rankin explains that, in dressing as a man, Qiu Jin was imitating heroes like Hua Mulan but also 'demanding the right as a woman to play male roles and, relishing the impropriety of her behaviour and dress, dramatising her protest against restrictions'.⁶³ There was no doubt that her cross-dressing increased her fame and her husband's frustration while also signalling her decision to challenge the distinction between the social roles ascribed to men and women. Lingzhen Wang, like Rankin, argues that this was more than a mere imitation of Hua Mulan because unlike Mulan's donning of men's clothing Qiu's 'anticipated no return to any existing female role or conventional female embodiment'.⁶⁴ Qiu Jin was making a personal decision to model the capacity for the female body to have manly or masculine social attributes.

But, in contrast to later women soldiers she was still trapped in the traditional mindset where she *had* to dress as a man to assume what she perceived to be 'manly roles'. Only two decades later, women would not have to 'pass as men' to become soldiers – they would feel quite comfortable as women soldiers dressed in specialist military uniforms – i.e. they were dressed as 'soldiers' rather than as 'men-who-are-soldiers'. In the next chapter, we see that by the 1920s women like Xie Bingying no longer needed to deny their femaleness as a prerequisite for soldiering. Women soldiers dressed in military uniform still perceived themselves and were perceived by others as *women* – strange and exotic women, but women, nonetheless. They were not masquerading as men, as was Qiu Jin in her performance of the noble female knight errant role.

Qiu Jin did more than simply don men's clothing – she also altered her physical body to become more effectively martial. Undertaking strenuous physical exercise after arriving in Tokyo she described her exertions to her brother as follows: 'Everyday I practice calisthenics that have made my body strong.'⁶⁵ In Shaoxing, her school's curriculum included extensive physical training for male and females alike. Reformist intellectuals tried to spur on

their fellow Han by describing China as 'The Sick Man of Asia'.⁶⁶ Only through improving their physical body and intellectual state would China survive – and in the eyes of those mobilising this epithet women were far sicker than men because of the crippling impact of footbinding. But, it was not only in the physical realm that women were deficient. In the Chinese context masculinity connoted a set of noble moral and spiritual qualities that women were generally regarded as lacking – heroism, ambition, high-minded patriotism and courage of conviction. She revealed her frustration at the mismatch between her female physical form and her manly mental frame in a poem to a Japanese friend whom she met while in Beijing. Titled 'Walking through the Sedge-Grass' it proceeds:

My ambition is manly,
 My life is too narrow,
 To no avail is my mind filled with heroic daring!
 Let me question High Heaven about my bad fate:
 Although a mere woman, I suffer like the poet Qu Yuan!⁶⁷

The story of Qu Yuan (343–278 BCE) is central to Chinese cultural history. He represents the archetypal, manly patriotic poet because he drowned himself in despair at the state of his country. Even today, annual festivals are held to celebrate his life – known as Double Fifth or Dragon Boat Festival.⁶⁸ To Qiu Jin, Qu Yuan's circumstances mirrored China's current dire situation.

Qiu Jin's enthusiasm for masculine gender roles fuelled her feminist sentiment but her thinking was locked into existing conceptions about male and female social roles and moral capacity. Women, trapped by their bodies, had to become men in order to take on masculine roles. Only a decade after her death women who sought to create new roles for themselves in the public sphere as workers, professionals, or soldiers were able to invoke the increasingly powerful icon of the 'Modern Woman' or the 'New Woman'. They no longer needed the female knight errant persona to justify their claims to this public world of national affairs. While the Modern Woman idea had been circulating around the world during the last years of Qiu Jin's life it would only take concrete form in China from about 1915 onwards. When they did emerge these new-style women did not pretend to be men in order to enter the public spaces of political power, military impact and economic influence, they presented themselves as Modern Women and proudly claimed their rights as women. So significant was the Modern Woman as a social force that she became a site of contestation from the political class that sought to ensure she was a politically oriented patriotic woman, not one that simply pretended to be modern while using newly won access to public space for shopping and flirting.⁶⁹

From nationalist swordswoman to feminist warrior

The female knight errant model that Qiu Jin and her friends invoked were extraordinary women who appeared during extraordinary times to take up arms with and for their brothers, husbands and fathers. But, none of these women, historical or imagined, fought for women's rights – they were firmly creatures of a patriarchal order that required women to extend themselves in times of crisis.⁷⁰ Qiu Jin invoked their fame and the positive emotive connections of these ancient women warriors as saviours of the country – but extended their significance by including a woman's rights agenda. She achieved this shift firm in the belief, like the 1898 reformers who influenced her generation so powerfully, that women's dependency and weakness was central to China's failure to withstand the impact of foreign powers.

In her many writings on women's rights and the importance of mobilising women, Qiu Jin targeted women's dependency on men and passivity in relation to their own oppression. While she clearly identifies men as the opposition in phrases like 'With their theories and tricks men deceive us,' she also challenges women to rouse themselves from their passivity. 'My sisters, my compatriots! Those who cannot be independent should be determined to be independent. Those who can be independent should nourish the desire to save all their sisters in the world from the sea of suffering, they can put it off no longer!'⁷¹

Qiu Jin's campaign against footbinding drew on the idea that the forced crippling of women was central to their weakness as a sex and by extension their country's vulnerability. The pain of undertaking physical activity on newly unbound feet was likely excruciating for many of her students. 'Alas! These girls – Why did they have to suffer this mutilation at such a tender age? A bloody mess of broken bones – they could hardly walk!' A life of immobility, dependency and sickness accompanies this crippling, leaving Chinese women more prone to illness and death in childbirth than Japanese or European women, according to Qiu Jin. 'Why are our women willing to risk their lives and endure all that suffering for a pair of feet, to put up with every kind of pain, even to the point of having their bones broken? . . . It is their own fault for considering themselves as totally worthless. They do not try to acquire a craft or knowledge of use to their own lives, they know only how to rely on men and devote their entire lives to serving them.'⁷²

Her efforts at providing women with education, independence and physical strength stemmed from her belief that women had too long been passive in the face of their misery and, when active, had sought only to inflict misery on other women. Mothers break their daughters' feet and ignore their pain as they bind them. Mothers-in-law oppress their daughters-in-law and treat them like prisoners. Parents use matchmakers to choose slave-like wives for their sons. To Qiu Jin, these travesties occur because women do not rise and fight. 'We

women suffer a myriad kinds of oppression that are truly unbearable!' Only by overcoming 'layer after layer of nets and snares' that 'lock women up deep inside the inner quarters' can women be independent and participate equally in a new republic.⁷³

In addition to rousing women's awareness of the depths of horror to which they have sunk, she also uses an age-old rhetorical strategy – drawing negative comparisons with men to inspire action. In 'Full River Red' she writes:

In this ugly and dirty world
How many men, I ask you, are heroic and wise?
Only from the ranks of those with painted eyebrows
From time to time do stalwarts emerge!

She then continues by beseeching her fellow women to take up arms.

I urge those of you present here
To exert yourself to the utmost.
Be fired by the desire to ensure the future of your race,
Prosperity does not depend on showing off your jewels.
These bow-like shoes, three inches long, condemn us to inaction:
This must change!⁷⁴

The failure of men, on her logic, demanded that women arise and transform themselves. Another poem uses the same negative appraisal of men to remind women of their capacities. In her commentary on a Qing story, 'Records of the Sesame Niche', Qiu challenges its Manchu triumphalism and asserts the importance of mobilising women for success in battle. Stanza 5 reads: 'Banished into this dusty world, what a shame to be a man / Shouldering dagger-axes, young beauties became generals / Now the names of the loyal and the filial belong to women.' Stanza 8 sustains her theme that women from China's past have recorded martial skills oftentimes superior to men. 'Officials who eat meat are all useless; / Beautiful women defended the nation. / Two extraordinary women commented on military affairs, / They rivalled Hua Mulan.'⁷⁵ The two women she refers to are the anti-Manchu Ming dynasty (1368–1644) loyalists, Qin Liangyu and Shen Yunying.

Just as we saw in the section above discussing Qiu Jin's cross-dressing, her elevation of women and denigration of men is far from a radical, new trope in Chinese cultural traditions. Advancing the idea that the women of a particular time or place are better than the men is a centuries-old stock moral framework. China's most famous novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, first circulating in the 1760s revolves around the proclaimed superiority of the young female characters, who serve as foils for the decrepit men presiding over the once-great family's decline.⁷⁶ Excellence among womenfolk signified the declining state of the menfolk – as manifest in the maxim 'When *yin* dominates, *yang* declines.' In this cultural context, having strong women is nothing to celebrate.

Rather, it stands as a warning to men that they need to improve. Readers of Qiu Jin's poetry would have filtered her claims of female supremacy through the lens in which it signalled broader societal calamity and crisis. At such times, it was expected that a female knight errant would appear – and equally expected that such a woman would die a sacrificial martyr. Although Qiu Jin sought to create a new world rather than rebuild the old patriarchal order, many viewing her actions, listening to her speeches and reading her poems would have understood her as another old-style loyal, exemplary woman.

Feminism was a key motivation for Qiu Jin's radical action – but it is marked by the times in which she lived. Not only was it mediated by long traditions of exemplary cross-dressing women who appeared in times of crisis and male incompetence, it was also read within a strong tradition of eulogising women's suicides as markers their virtue. Qiu Jin's willingness to await capture and her enthusiastic martyrdom were problematic for later Modern Women and other critics of chastity suicides. The radical advocates of modernisation who emerged during the New Culture Movement years (1915–1925) explicitly targeted female suicide and chastity as backward and harmful to women's progress. During Qiu Jin's era, however, the prospect and eventuality of her martyr's death was an unproblematic noble and heroic act well within the realms expected of the woman knight errant.

Problematic women knights errant in modern and communist China

Awe of Qiu Jin's romanticised and mythic martyr's suicide dwindled in the Republican era when warfare and military systems modernised as quickly as social attitudes. Not everyone remained convinced of the effectiveness of her martyrdom and many saw her active seeking of personal fame as outdated. Writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) witnessed Qiu Jin's knife-waving 1905 speech when he was a student in Japan, but he ignored her exhortation that Chinese students quit Tokyo and return to China. He developed a sceptical attitude about spectacles as political action, noting that Qiu Jin sought the limelight, performed sensationalism, provoked her audiences and was ultimately 'clapped to death'⁷⁷ – a victim of her own publicity machine. In a 1919 short story based on Qiu Jin's execution, 'Medicine', Lu Xun explored the futility of these spectacular sacrifices – ordinary people simply came to watch the execution 'show' and did not understand the politics behind the sacrifice. They merely moved on to become passive audiences for the next spectacle.⁷⁸ However, Qiu Jin was primarily addressing her fellow literati who carried the same class-based cultural codes of sacrifice and public performance. The idea that the 'masses' were an appropriate audience only emerged in the 1920s as

China's elite adopted more democratic attitudes and rejected Confucian ideals of leadership by enlightened literati.⁷⁹

A similar questioning of Qiu Jin's decision to become a martyr appeared in Xia Yan's 1937 play about her life titled *The Spirit of Freedom*⁸⁰ performed at the start of the eight-year war against the invading Japanese – in which women fought alongside men in formal and auxiliary military roles. In the play the significance of a self-sacrificing death is discussed explicitly between Qiu Jin and her colleagues as they debate her plan to await the Qing troops. Qiu declares that 'The decision to "die for a just cause" is inherent to the revolutionary party' and 'A lot of our comrades' blood has been shed for this failure. They bravely died for this just cause, so if I feel danger now how can the revolutionary party talk about having a righteous faith in the future?' To which her friends replied in the most modern of terms: 'I didn't know you were so stupidly stubborn. You have been ruined by those books of old on virtue and righteousness,' and, 'Commander, my final words: Suicide means that you have given up your fight against the Qing government! It means that you admit your personal failure.'⁸¹ Xia Yan depicts her fellow rebels as encouraging her to escape and arguing against traditional knight errant ideals of self-sacrifice to a righteous purpose.⁸² In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, a Qiu Jin-style 'female knight errant' martyrdom seemed like an anachronistic vestige of older and debunked morality. While Qiu Jin was a model of sorts for many other female warriors in the struggle against Japan from 1937 to 1945, her welcoming the martyr's death was problematic. Soldiers, female or male, had to really fight to the death rather than sit writing poetry performing patient, suicidal martyrdom.

The shift away from glorifying suicidal martyrs partly grew from the influence of western, socialist ideology on the military forces that emerged in the 1920s – the Communist International movement provided core organisational and financial support to both the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Their party-armies were designed to be disciplined fighting forces – enlistment and survival, body counts and the burden of the injured were central to the strategic operation of military troops facing conventional battles. For Qiu Jin and her rebels, this level of military professionalism did not exist. There was no concept of sustaining a war, rather it was one of destabilising the Qing through assassination, small-scale uprisings and civil unrest in the hope of building larger resistance and inspire Qing troops to turn against the Manchu.⁸³ Martyrs to a rebel cause were effective in this disruptive role. Women martyrs held particular popular appeal because they combined the romance of the woman knight errant mythology and the virtuous female suicides of the Qing – thousands of whom had asserted their chastity or honour through suicide.⁸⁴

The following chapter on Xie Bingying shows how the Qiu Jin model of glorious martyrdom fell from favour in the 1920s and surviving to fight another

day became the prized attribute. Qiu Jin would be one of the last women warriors to present *herself* as a female soldier martyr. Helen Foster Snow noted this in her 1967 chapter on Qiu Jin: 'She [Qiu Jin] also believed in personal heroism, which the present-day Communists in China hold in little esteem.'⁸⁵ That is not to say that martyrdom would not be mobilised in the communist militarisation processes after 1949 – but, individuals were not praised for their self-conscious orchestration of their own martyrdom. The CCP produced large numbers of communist martyrs after 1949 but unlike Qiu Jin's 'vainglorious' self-determined death – passive suicide was not eulogised whereas struggling-to-a-certain-death in battle clearly was (see chapters on Liu Hulan and Zhao Yiman below). In the many contradictory twists of People's Republic of China's (PRC) literary and political campaigns, Xia Yan faced vehement criticism for his depiction of Qiu Jin's as 'suicide' rather than a 'sacrosanct act of revolutionary martyrdom'.⁸⁶

Apart from its utility in providing evidence to attack Xia Yan and his drama, Qiu Jin's story was not given particular prominence in the PRC until after Mao Zedong's death with the winding back of radical, revolutionary politics from 1978 under Deng Xiaoping. Traditional virtues and ideals began to make their reappearance. Commencing with a series of events in 1979 surrounding the centenary of Qiu Jin's birth and the renovation of her 'old home' for tourists, the CCP's embrace of Qiu Jin would continue into the twenty-first century. She is now a stock patriotic figure in school texts and popular reports on the 1911 revolution.

Two full-length feature films were produced that reveal the return of the romanticised self-sacrificing woman knight errant. In 1983 renowned filmmaker Xie Jin made a film of her life.⁸⁷ In 2011 a Hong Kong–China co-production directed by Herman Yau released *The Woman Knight of Mirror Lake*, explicitly invoking her 'female knight errant' appellation in the Chinese movie title *Jingxiong nüxia*.⁸⁸ In both films her feminism is muted and her patriotism amplified. The gendered and militarised narratives underpinning both movies show the increasing reluctance of the post-Mao PRC government to promote antagonistic social movements and their concomitant desire to buttress family cohesion. In 2011 Qiu Jin is presented as being frustrated by her incompetent husband but she does not loathe and despise him – as is documented in her letters and replicated in the 1983 Xie Jin version. The desire for China's revolutionary heroine to have a happy nuclear family dominates Yau's 2011 film. Its final scene shows her husband on his deathbed requesting to be buried with Qiu Jin followed by a lyrical image of Qiu Jin running along a grassy bank flying kites joyously with her children. She was, after all, a good mother as all good women should be – national heroic martyrs or not. The feminist who rebelled against patriarchy and abandoned her children is banished. Xie Jin's 1983 film romanticises Qiu Jin's misery at being separated from

her children but makes no attempt to repair her relationship with her husband. Instead, 1983 audiences see Qiu Jin forming close revolutionary bonds with other like-minded people, such as Xu Xilin. Audiences of Xie Jin's 1983 film witness the intense training – ideological and physical – that went into crafting Qiu Jin as a soldier. These old communist values of striving hard to continuously improve one's skills are central to her success as a martyr in 1983. In Yau's 2011 film, audiences are told that she was a child prodigy – skilled in martial arts from an early age, naturally rebellious and filled with patriotic fervour. Her talents magically emerge just as her capacity to bounce off walls and leap from buildings are superhuman too.⁸⁹ By the twenty-first century Qiu Jin has been re-incorporated into the ancient woman knight errant myths of magical, incredible exceptional woman – harmless to the status quo, be that patriarchy or one-party-state, simply because she is so unbelievable.

Conclusion

Qiu Jin imagined herself as a romantic and heroic figure so it is not surprising that later retellings of her story make use of this trope in their commercial or propaganda roles. She was without doubt a brave, loyal, self-sacrificing, noble and pure-spirited individual with martial intent. But, the traits absent from this list reveal a considerable amount about the various social and political ideals that emerged after the end of the Qing dynasty. Her anti-Manchu views are muted in later stories of her life. Once China became the multiethnic states of the ROC from 1912 and the PRC from 1949, hatred for Manchus by a lauded patriotic martyr was problematic for social cohesion. Similarly, her antagonism towards men's unequal access to power as a structural and societal problem is diminished and even twisted to deny its primacy in her political agenda. Equally, contemporary stories of her life minimise her advocacy of political violence as a tool to produce regime change. Instead she becomes a poet and propagandist or a fantastical super-human kung fu fighter abstracted from the world of real military struggle. The utility of the female knight errant in real-world battles was always questionable but she is resoundingly exposed as a myth in the pragmatic world that emerged in the ROC. As we see in the following chapter, real military engagement required the invention of an entirely new set of ideological tools to enable women's participation in warfare – the romantic knight errant would return to her fantasy-land box. The New Culture New Woman who claimed public space in employment, travel, school and the army would emerge to really join the battle.