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Tobias Frederik RETTIG

Singapore Management University, tobiasrettig@smu.edu.sg

Vina Lanzona

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Women warriors in Asia

VINA LANZONA AND TOBIAS RETTIG

Feminist scholars have pointed out the neglect of women actors in history and this has led to the writing of women's narratives and to a more general re-examination of the role played by gender in history and the social sciences. This special issue of *IIAS Newsletter* highlights a particularly interesting phenomenon, namely that of women's leadership and participation in warfare and revolution. The geographical bias is towards Southeast Asia, although two papers deal with China and one at least partially with India. Five of the eight papers presented here were part of a larger panel on "Women Warriors in Southeast Asia", presented at the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) in Kuala Lumpur, August 2007.

We were originally motivated by a recent surge of studies on women's participation in 20th century Asian revolutions and war, usually studies focusing on a single country (Lee 1999; Young 2001; Turner/Phanh 1998; Taylor 1999) or transnational movement (Khoo 2004; Lebra forthcoming), but felt that we still know relatively little on a comparative basis (Andaya 2007). One excellent volume edited by Tétreault (1994) "*Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*" contains a mere four studies on Asia (China, Indonesia, Korea, Vietnam) and the emphasis is not on war. Encyclopaedia-style portraits of women warriors (Salmonson 1991) and those who cluster women warriors geographically or historically (Jones 1997; De Pauw 1999) are informative but treat issues crucial to understanding women warriors superficially. Aiming for a wide audience, there is a heavy reliance on secondary sources, which specialists to the subject would deem insufficient. Few studies actually use gender as an analytical tool.

Topics and themes

Several of the papers, generally those on pre-1900 women warriors, focus more closely on prominent individual women warriors. Hence Geoff Wade and Louise Edwards investigate two female warriors - Lady Sinn and Hua Mulan respectively - who might have lived at the same time, about 1500 years ago, if not for serious doubts about the latter's existence. Nevertheless, Edwards' discussion of the often neglected topic of Hua Mulan's sexuality allows her to look at the various representations of one of China's most beloved literary characters in poetry, opera, cinema and plays. Edwards explores the problems of feminine sexuality and female sexual virtue brought about by her proximity with men. Mulan's female body in masculine attire is constantly placed under scrutiny, and serves as a fodder to issues of homosexuality and normative sexual behaviour inside the military.

Unlike the cross-dressing Hua Mulan, Lady Sinn (c. 512-602) is historically recorded as having donned armour as late as into her seventies. Based on Chinese imperial records, Geoff Wade resurrects Lady Sinn and reveals an astute political, military, and diplomatic leader who belonged to a powerful 'ethnic minority' family in territories that have since become an integral part of China. He not only raises the important question about the cultural and historical limits of 'Southeast Asia', but also problematises Lady Sinn's role in the subjugation of Southeast Asia's north-western ethnic minorities to the more powerful succession of Chinese dynasties she would serve. Was the popular leader a collaborator or an exceptional, independent-minded and politically astute local powerbroker?

A common thread running through the papers by Elsa Clavé-Çelik and Tobias Rettig is the use of national heroines for the mobilisation of later generations of respectively, Acehnese and Indian women warriors. Hence Clavé-Çelik's contribution shows how Indonesia's, but also Aceh's, national heroine, Laksamana (Admiral) Keu-

malahayati (c. 1600) was perhaps too uncritically reconstructed as an archetypal woman warrior based on a Hindu mythological model rather than on historical fact. Though Keumalahayati was the first to come up with the idea of creating an entire women's unit made up of widows, the Armada Inong Balee, her overpowering image has arguably also marginalised the ordinary female 'foot soldiers' of the subsequent Acehnese wars against the Dutch and the Indonesian Republic.

What the Laksamana is to the Indonesians, the Rani (Queen) of Jhansi is even more to the Indians. Her leadership and eventual death in the Indian Rebellion of 1857-8 would elevate her to semi-mythical prominence in India. Rettig shows how her name would be invoked 85 years later, in Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia, to mobilise the region's overseas Indian communities to form a unit of 1,500 women, some as young as 16 years. While the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army was sectarian in that it excluded non-Indians, its twin achievements were to unite South Asian women of different creed, class, caste, and ethnicity, and to form a pool of leaders who would go on to play important political and social roles in post-independence India and Malaysia.

The issue of war and sexuality figures prominently in the essays of Adrianna Tan and Vina Lanzona. Both discuss the intersection of the personal and the political in the lives of modern-day women warriors involved in the nationalist and communist struggles in Malaya, Vietnam and the Philippines. Tan's essay, inspired by Agnes Khoo's oral interviews with women of the Malayan Communist Party (2004), outlines the extraordinary achievements of these women, serving as commanders, organisers, Politburo members, rank and file soldiers, doctors and nurses. Despite the demands placed on them by the struggle, they continued to pursue personal lives and sought to balance their desires for love, marriage and family within the collective aims of the revolution.

Similarly, Lanzona looks deeply into how the communist party leadership in both the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle and the Huk rebellion in the Philippines regulated the same issues of love, marriage, sexuality and family inside their movements. Her analysis shows that such issues, normally seen as peripheral to revolutionary struggles, are central because revolutionary success depended on how well the leadership incorporated the personal passions and sexual desires of its members. Lanzona suggests that the Huk leadership took a more accepting stance towards sexual relationships but thereby sapped the revolution of vital energies that were now being devoted to institutions with often contradictory goals and needs, such as those of family and party. In contrast, the Vietnamese communist movement more successfully subordinated individual longing to the bigger revolutionary goal of independence.

Finally, the two essays by Jacqueline Siapno and Susan Blackburn are those perhaps most relevant for NGOs, the UN, and post-independence policy-makers and bureaucracies. They discuss a crucial issue for contemporary women warriors and female war veterans: successful reintegration into their post-conflict societies. Siapno analyses the recent surveys of female personnel in the police and the military in the newly independent state of East Timor. She shows that often women's needs are conflated with the men's, thus leading to the former's neglect and marginalisation. Blackburn builds on these arguments through a comparative study of former women warriors in Cambodia and East Timor. While women were mobilised and played crucial roles in wars and revolution, they tend to just disappear at the end of a war. Although some progress has been made since the UN mission in Cambodia, the operationalisation of new international norms is still lacking due to elite male

domination of post-independence decision-making. Both authors argue, in Siapno's words, that "gender needs to be included as a variable...to allow for [women's] smooth and fair transition to a post-conflict society".

Concluding thoughts

All of the essays in this special issue place women at the centre of explorations on war, revolution, and independence struggles in Asia. Instead of treating them as anomalous, ambiguous, and unnatural women, the authors show that since the earliest times to the contemporary period, women in Asia existed alongside men as they embraced roles as warriors and combatants. But by using the analytical lens of gender, the essays here show that these women's experiences should be distinguished from men, and that these women warriors should be given their unique treatment and recognition in historical accounts and memory.

Vina A. Lanzona

University of Hawaii-Manoa
vlanzona@hawaii.edu

Tobias Rettig

Singapore Management University
tobiasrettig@smu.edu.sg

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