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Cover Page Footnote
I am deeply appreciative of Professor Margaret Wan (University of Utah) for her instruction and encouragement, as well as the family and friends that have supported me along the way.

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Outlaws of the Marsh

Ryan Christenson

Introduction

The classic novel Outlaws of the Marsh, also known as Water Margin or All Men Are Brothers, tells the tale of the formation and battles of a band of 108 outlaws and their army. Based around the Marsh of Mount Liang and led by Song Jiang, this army struggles against the corrupt government of the Northern Song dynasty and, later on, foreign invaders from the north. Frequently attributed to Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong, this 14th century work is said to be partially based on real events, although highly embellished. Translator Sidney Shapiro relates that “Historians confirm that the story is derived from fact. Some of the events actually happened, some of the persons actually existed” (Shapiro 2145).

While the army of outlaws in the novel is overwhelmingly composed of men, three major women stand among their ranks. These are Mistress Gu the Tigress, “Ten Feet of Steel” Hu Sanniang, and Sun Erniang the Witch. The roles that these warrior women play do not fit neatly into traditional Confucian understandings of gender, and they each play critical parts in the success of the band of outlaws. But while these women are frequently lumped together as “woman generals,” closer analysis reveals significant differences. Mistress Gu is a
particularly fascinating character, and the primary aim of this essay is to analyze her according to knight-errant (xia) principles in order to demonstrate how she is set apart from her peers.

Evidence from the text will be presented with translated commentary from the Ming and Qing dynasties in order to shed light on Mistress Gu’s character and reveal how she was viewed by scholars of late imperial China. These commentaries are collected in Chen et al’s *Shuihu zhuan huiping ben* (“Water Margin with Collected Commentaries”), which has been translated and inserted into Sydney Shapiro’s 100 chapter translation of the novel. The commentaries included in this essay are those attributed to Li Zhi (1527-1602), as well as those written by Yu Xiangdou (d. 1637) and Jin Shengtan (d. 1661), who condensed the story to 70 chapters but whose commentary is the most widely read and celebrated. However, before analyzing Mistress Gu’s character, it is necessary to provide some background on martial women in Chinese narrative literature and define relevant terms.

**Defining Nüjiang and Nüxia: Women Warriors in the Chinese Tradition**

Heroic women are prevalent in many works of Chinese literature, most often taking the form of either the *nüjiang* 女將 or the *nüxia* 女俠. Both terms share a
nü 女, which essentially means “woman” or “girl.” Here jiāng 將 refers to someone who leads or is in charge of others, such as a general or commander of an army (jiangjun 將軍), so nüjiang may accordingly be understood to refer to a woman warrior-general. A familiar example is Mulan, who is said to have disguised herself as a man and performed heroic martial feats on the battlefield in place of her father. Nüjiang are heavily involved in formal warfare, such as leading troops in battle against an opposing army, and are frequently motivated by loyalty, duty, and filial piety.

While the definition of nüjiang is fairly straightforward, the term nüxia is more complex. The word xia 俠 essentially refers to a vigilante who saves or avenges those who have been wronged. Despite “knight-errant” being the prevalent translation, one should be careful not to conflate a xia with the European knight-errant or Western ideas of chivalry (see James J. Y. Liu’s The Chinese Knight-Errant). Avengers, assassins, and “honorable” thieves may also fit under the umbrella term of xia. Nüxia specifically is a recent term that was created to refer to women who embody xia characteristics, recognizing that they should be distinguished from male xia. Nüxia are more frequently involved in personal conflicts and are motivated by vengeance or justice. They might carry out their missions through more subtle or underhanded means, rather than through mounted combat on a formal battlefield.
While it is obvious that there are certain virtuous qualities that set apart xia from other kinds of warriors like nüjiang, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on a concrete definition of what those traits might be. Descriptions of xia vary between scholars, and often part of one scholar’s definition will contradict that of another. The earliest description of xia and their character is found in Sima Qian’s esteemed historical record Shiji, written in the first century BCE during the Han dynasty (Liu 13); it contains an entire chapter devoted to youxia, or “wandering knights” as they were also called. The scholar James J. Y. Liu translated the following passage of the Shiji, which he translates as Records of the Historiographer, in his book The Chinese Knight-Errant (1967):

Now, as for the knights-errant, though their actions were not in accordance with the rule of propriety, they always meant what they said, always accomplished what they set out to do, and always fulfilled their promises. They rushed to the aid of other men in distress without giving a thought to their own safety. And when they had saved someone from disaster at the risk of their own lives, they did not boast of their ability and would have been ashamed to brag of their benevolence. (Liu 14-15)
Several values can be identified from this passage, including bravery, truthfulness, altruism, humility, and dependability, as well as acting against the rule of propriety. In 1960, two millennia after Sima Qian, scholar Robert Ruhlmann wrote regarding *xia* behavior that “By killing or other unconventional means, [the *xia*] acts where legal action is bound to fail” (170). In other words, the simplest definition of a *xia* is a vigilante, though *xia* do tend to exhibit several principles particular to themselves.

Some scholars have attempted to define a moral code or set of ideals that knights-errant typically adhere to. In the aforementioned book *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (1967), Liu lists eight ideals that he believes form the basic *xia* code of behavior: altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness and mutual faith, honor and fame, and finally, generosity and contempt for wealth (Liu 4-6). The traits of altruism, justice, and courage are particularly important and applicable. However, Liu’s list of *xia* ideals is not universally accepted by scholars; in fact, there is considerable debate around creating a code of *xia* values at all. In *The Sword or the Needle: The Female Knight-Errant (xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative*, literature scholar Roland Altenburger writes that “James J. Y. Liu attempted to vaguely define the early *xia* by a heterogenous bundle of ‘ideals’, among which *yi*, a sense of duty, righteousness, perhaps stands out as the ethical value which infused *xia* behavior the most” (29). But in *The Knight-Errant and the Good Fellow in Chinese
Narrative: Water Margin and the Xia (Hero) Tradition, Altenburger calls Liu’s list of ideals “inconclusive” (Altenburger 2). Altenburger believes that xia behavior boils down to “reciprocity” or bao. “In the Chinese conception of justice, the moral imperative of reciprocity is fundamental to all social behavior. …According to this concept, the favor by a benefactor has to be returned (bao’en 報恩), just as a wrongful action must be retaliated in revenge (baochou 報仇). The latter, vengeance, in particular, became the defining pattern of xia action” (2-3). Regarding female knights-errant, Altenburger considers two themes to be of particular importance: “the xia theme, which, at its centre, involved a concept of violent retaliation outside the official system of justice; and the theme of gender-bending or gender reversal as a challenge to the Confucian conception of social roles and gender ideology” (25). The difference between a nüxia and a male xia, then, is mainly that the nüxia encompasses a gender-bending or reversal theme in addition to the other xia traits.

Standing in stark contrast to James J. Y. Liu’s neat list of eight xia values, Altenburger writes in The Sword or the Needle that “Chinese knight-errantry was not informed by any unified set of ethical values but remained eclectic and pragmatic” (29). How can these two viewpoints be reconciled? While it is true that there is no evidence of a rigid ethical code, there are nevertheless other values or traits that are frequently exhibited by xia characters besides reciprocity,
vengeful retribution, and gender-bending, even if they aren’t universally or strictly practiced by every xia practitioner. Therefore, Liu’s xia code may be taken as a list of ideals, but not requirements. Xia typically act under their own prerogative, exercising judgment in each particular circumstance. While a xia may strive to act in an honorable way, they are still taking justice into their own hands as a vigilante and are willing to sacrifice an ideal for the sake of accomplishing their goal. This essay uses the following definition for nüxia: the female knight-errant is a courageous vigilante who selflessly aids others and corrects injustice through violent retaliation, often against the law and in defiance of the traditional Confucian gender roles typically required of her.

**Mistress Gu the Tigress and the Jailbreak**

In *Outlaws of the Marsh*, the character Mistress Gu, known as Gu Dasao 顧大嫂 in Mandarin Chinese, is categorized as a woman warrior-general along with “Ten Feet of Steel” Hu Sanniang and Sun Erniang “the Witch.” The three of them are given certain ranks, titles, and duties among the 108 Stars of Destiny and participate in several campaigns. However, Mistress Gu possesses particular qualities that distinguish her from other women by being more in line with that of a nüxia, including selfless bravery and a strong desire for justice.
Mistress Gu has been largely overlooked by modern Western scholars, but has long been lauded by certain Chinese commentators. In the 17th century, the scholar Chen Chen wrote, “Among the three nüjiang, Mistress Gu towers above the others in her own league. Her power is not at all inferior to a kumbhāṇḍa (鳩槃荼) spirit, making one ever more feel that she is fearsome and formidable.” Chen Chen here references Mistress Gu as being one of the three nüjiang or woman general characters in the novel, but clearly places her apart from the others. From her very first introduction until her last scene, Hu Sanniang is shown charging into the fray on horseback and playing an active role in several battles throughout the novel. Mistress Gu, on the other hand, is an innkeeper by trade and is typically involved in smaller and more personal conflicts. She is not a professionally trained warrior or commander, and she is never the main general in charge of leading troops. I believe it is not merely her fierce kumbhāṇḍa-like strength that sets her apart, but also her virtue and character that makes her tower above the other two women.

1 Mistress Gu is mentioned twice in Roland Altenburger’s The Sword or the Needle, but only briefly, and she is not discussed as possessing any chivalrous traits. Other Western secondary sources on the topic do not mention her at all.
2 The word kumbhāṇḍa refers to a powerful spirit in Buddhism and comes from Sanskrit. It is transcribed into Chinese characters as 鳩槃荼 or 鳩槃荼, which is pronounced jiupantu in modern Mandarin. According to William H. Baxter, the older Middle Chinese pronunciation would have been something like kjuew-ban-du, which more closely resembles the Sanskrit word. See William H. Baxter’s A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology (De-Gruyter Mouton, 1992). See also the individual entries for each Chinese character in Paul W. Kroll’s A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese (3rd, ed. Brill Academic Publishers, 2022).
Let us now examine passages from the novel and the traditional commentaries to see how Mistress Gu’s qualities compare to those of the nüxia. This section will focus on chapter 49, which is titled “The Two Suns Break Open the Jail; The Xie Brothers Make Their Escape.” Though Mistress Gu is not mentioned in the title, she plays a critical role in organizing and carrying out the rescue.

In the beginning of this chapter, Mistress Gu’s cousins Xie Zhen and Xie Bao are hunting a tiger that they have been hired to kill. After shooting it with a poisoned arrow, the carcass ends up in the yard of Squire Mao, who steals it. When the Xie brothers protest, he has them framed as robbers and imprisoned, and then bribes the warden Bao Ji to dispose of them. However, their keeper Yue He recognizes the two brothers and desires to help them. In the following passage, Xie Zhen describes Mistress Gu to Yue He, believing that their cousin can rescue them:

“Actually, she’s a cousin, and she’s known as Mistress Gu, the Tigress. [...] When she fights, no twenty or thirty men can touch her. Even Sun Xin, her husband, can’t vanquish her, skilled as he is with weapons. [Jin Shengtan: This part praises their cousin, but even her husband’s praise is evident. Marvelous writing. (905)] She’s very fond of my brother and me. ... If you would be good
enough to let them know, secretly, I’m sure our cousin the Tigress would come and rescue us” (Shapiro 1037).

Note the incredible gender-bending strength and skill of the Tigress, which surpasses that of many men. Yue He immediately leaves for Mistress Gu’s inn. Upon arriving, he promptly tells Mistress Gu of the wrongful imprisonment and impending execution of her cousins:

“Our we’re related, and chivalry comes first, I told them what I knew. They said no one but you can rescue them. That may be, but only if you act fast.” Mistress Gu uttered a cry of lamentation. [Jin Shengtan: When writing about Mistress Gu, there is no use for the four words “quiet and modest maiden.”] [Jie (attr. Li Zhi): She didn’t make a lion’s roar, she only let out a tiger’s cry. With this Tigress, how could you fear the Tiger Mao? (906)] She shouted to her assistants to fetch her husband. (Shapiro 1038)

Her immediate reaction is to cry out and call for her husband Sun Xin so they can confer on what to do to help her cousins. In Jin Shengtan’s commentary, the phrase “quiet and modest maiden” refers to the first poem in the Book of Poetry, which praises a young woman for her feminine traits (Cui and Cai 1-2). Here Jin is pointing out that Mistress Gu’s great concern for her cousins causes her to act contrary to feminine propriety and virtues, which shows the depth and strength of her emotion and concern for her cousins. Thus, the gender-bending theme in her character is already apparent. Remember that Sima Qian wrote “[xia’s] actions were not in accordance with the rule of propriety,” or the acceptable rules of behavior established by Confucian scholars and government officials. This can also be extended to feminine standards of behavior. Another commentator, supposedly Li Zhi, makes note of her “tiger’s cry” and alludes to her fierce bravery, which trumps any fear that one may feel towards her newfound enemy Squire Mao.

As is evident in the above passage, the theme of gender-bending or gender reversal is very prevalent in Mistress Gu’s character. When she is first introduced in the text, Xie Zhen remarks, “When she fights, no twenty or thirty men can touch her. Even Sun Xin, her husband, can’t vanquish her, skilled as he is with weapons” (Shapiro 1037), which shows strength and skill far superior to most men. Later, once her husband has been summoned, Mistress Gu doesn’t waste any time. Below is the conversation between her and Sun Xin:
“Any ideas on how to save them?” she asked. [Rong (attr. Li Zhi):]

*Do not say this is a woman! Moreover, despite only being maternal cousins, she is readily willing to exert herself to save them...how about that! (906)*)

[Sun Xin:] “That scoundrel Squire Mao has money and power. [...] He certainly will see to it that they’re killed. They have to be snatched out of that prison. There isn’t any other solution.” “I’ll go with you tonight,” said Mistress Gu. [Jin Shengtan: Marvelous. Truly in her eyes, there is nothing that is too difficult! She could also be called “Female Whirlwind,” meaning that she truly is second to none next to Li Kui “the Whirlwind.” (906)] Sun smiled. “You’re too rash.” (1039)

Notice the concern and urgency that Mistress Gu displays, which prompts her husband to point out her rashness. Given his smile, it’s clear that Sun Xin implicitly approves of her burning desire to aid her cousins, but a plan is needed. Clearly, she is anxious to save them. To paraphrase Sima Qian, it may be said that Mistress Gu “rushed to the aid of [others] in distress without giving a thought to [her] own safety” (Liu 15). In his commentary, Jin Shengtan even considers her to be the equal of Li Kui, who is known for rushing into battle like a whirlwind and whom Jin had previously lauded as being “truly in a class by himself” (Rolston
138). Evidently, Mistress Gu is the only one he considers worthy of equal comparison.

Mistress Gu also demonstrates greater bravery and determination than the men around her. When her brother-in-law Sun Li is reluctant to help her save her imprisoned cousins, she not only takes charge of the situation but also draws her blades on him to force his hand.

“Wait, sister-in-law,” Sun Li shouted. “Not so fast. I’m thinking of the future. Let’s talk this over.” […] “Even if you won’t go, at least send sister-in-law on ahead,” said Mistress Gu. “We’ll stage the raid without you.” (Shapiro 1044) [Yu: In this section, she plans to free the prisoners by force. We see Mistress Gu surpass a man in courage and ambition. (910)]

As is noted in Yu Xiangdou’s commentary, this passage shows how her bravery and fierce determination far surpasses that of a man. She is willing to rescue her cousins regardless of Sun Li’s support, while he is fearful of the consequences. It is evident that in a reversal of gender roles, Mistress Gu is the main leader of the jailbreak operation, rather than any of the men around her. At the same time, she also shows concern for her sister-in-law Mistress Yue (who is not a nüxia) and makes sure she is out of harm’s way.
Besides the theme of gender-bending, the other trait that Altenburger considers essential to the knight-errant is vengeance or violent retaliation against injustice. The theme of violent retaliation is manifest in Mistress Gu through her prison break as she rescues her cousins from their unjust imprisonment and pending execution. Once in the prison, Mistress Gu and Yue He goad the warden Bao Ji to descend down from his pavilion and approach them.

Angrily, Bao Ji came down from the pavilion. ‘Where are my brothers?’ Mistress Gu shouted at him. [Jin: Her strength is extremely fierce, and her voice is extremely pained. This scares me, and also grieves me.] She pulled out two gleaming daggers. Bao Ji could see that he was in danger, and he started to hurry from the courtyard. He ran right into the Xie brothers, who had dashed out of their cell, the racks in their hands. Before Bao Ji could defend himself, Xie Zhen struck him heavily with the corner of his rack, crushing the warden’s skull. [Jin: Bao’s luck is finished.]

Mistress Gu had already stabbed four or five keepers. Yelling, she and the two hunters fought their way out. (Shapiro 1046)

By quickly cutting down several guards and helping her cousins and the others fight their way out of the prison, Mistress Gu demonstrates great bravery...
and martial skills. Jin Shengtan’s commentary brings attention not only to her fearsome strength but also to the pain in her voice as she shouts for the whereabouts of her cousins, or “brothers” as she calls them, which shows how close and dear she holds them to her heart. As another commentary attributed to Li Zhi remarks, they are “true flesh and blood” (Chen et al. 907). With this final passage, Mistress Gu achieves her goal of rescuing her cousins and thoroughly demonstrates the themes of gender bending and violent retaliation against injustice that are central to nüxia characters.

**Opposing Viewpoints**

Returning to modern scholars’ definitions of knights-errant, there are a few possible counterarguments that must be addressed. Ruhlmann writes about the knight-errant that “the people he saves are not his relatives, and they may well be total strangers; he thus deserves the appellation ‘chivalric’” (171). He believes that one has a duty to their relatives, so someone who saves or avenges a relative is acting out of duty and not chivalry. Given that Mistress Gu rescued her cousins, does this preclude her from being considered a knight-errant?

First, it’s important to consider the fact that duty goes hand-in-hand with justice. Whether it is a duty to act because a relative is in danger or a duty to do the right thing in saving a stranger, there is still a sense of duty to act and correct
the injustice of the situation. Additionally, in Confucianism, a woman has a duty to her husband, father, and son; these are the most important relationships for a woman. As a distant relative, Mistress Gu does not necessarily have the same kind of duty to Xie Bao and Xie Zhen that she would to her immediate family. Although Li Zhi figuratively calls them “true flesh and blood,” he also remarks that it is extraordinary that she went to such lengths to save them since they were only maternal cousins, implying that she had no obligation to do so. Most importantly, contrary to Ruhlmann’s claim, stories of women avengers and knights-errant do in fact frequently involve avenging a family member. This could be a notable distinction between a male and female knight-errant: the latter more frequently avenges wrongs done to her own relatives than a male xia does. Stories demonstrating this are discussed by Luo Manling in her article “Gender, Genre, and Discourse: The Woman Avenger in Medieval Chinese Texts.” For example, consider the following story, “A Concubine Avenges Her Father’s Death” from Supplementary History of the Tang, originally recorded by Li Zhao:

In the Zhenyuan reign period [785-805], a temporary resident in Chang’an bought a concubine. He lived with her together for several years; then suddenly she disappeared. One night, she showed up carrying a human head. She told her husband, “My father was wronged, and so I came to this place. Now he is
“avenged!” She requested to go home. She parted from him in tears, going out the gate swift as the wind. (Luo 589)

This story is an excellent example of a nüxia executing vengeance in retaliation according to Altenburger’s definition. Perhaps in contrast to the male knight-errant, the female nüxia more frequently appears in the form of an avenger seeking justice against a wronged family member. Interestingly, the woman avenger in the story above completely rejects her feminine role in society and her duties as a mother by returning to kill her children before leaving that place for good. In contrast, after Mistress Gu rescues her cousins and they fight their way out of the prison, she seems to at least temporarily return to her normal place in society under Confucian gender roles. While Sun Li and the newly-freed Xie Zhen and Xie Bao go to slaughter Squire Mao and his household in revenge with the other men in the group, Mistress Gu is apparently tasked with protecting Mistress Yue and remains on her horse by the carriage. This seems to indicate that after the jailbreak, the men resume their dominant gender role as the ones in charge. While some nüxia seem to reject traditional women’s roles entirely, as in the story related by Li Zhao, many do not. However, Mistress Gu still assumes a protective role and thus still carries out a more masculine role despite relinquishing the leadership role back to her husband and the other men.
Let us consider another angle. In the story above, the woman avenger beheaded the one who wronged her father. In most *xia* or knight-errant stories, and particularly in female knight-errant stories like these, it is the chivalrous hero who enacts vengeance against the evildoer directly. Altenburger also wrote that violent retaliation or vengeance is the defining action of knight-errantry. However, in *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Mistress Gu does not personally kill the prison warden Bao Ji or take direct vengeance on Squire Mao herself. Can Mistress Gu still be considered a knight-errant without having taken a direct part in the act of retribution against Squire Mao or the warden Bao Ji?

First, it may be useful to consider other examples. It is worth noting that out of the five knight-errant assassins (*cike* 刺客) discussed by Sima Qian in Chapter 86 of the *Shiji* 史記 (*The Grand Scribe’s Records*), only Zhuan Zhu and Nie Zheng actually carried out any assassinations. Jing Ke and Yu Rang were unsuccessful in carrying out their missions, and Cao Mo backed down and threw away his sword after reaching an agreement where Duke Huan would return the land he seized from Cao Mo’s native state of Lu. From this, it is clear that in matters of retribution and vigilantism, it is the intent rather than the completion of an action that is most important. Given the opportunity, there is no doubt Mistress Gu would have dealt with the main perpetrators of the injustice against her.

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cousins directly. However, even though Mistress Gu did not personally enact 
vengeance on the warden Bao Ji or Squire Mao, her jailbreak was certainly a 
violent retaliation against injustice. She was the one who planned the jailbreak 
and she played a vital role in executing the plan, killing many guards in the 
process. Moreover, as one of the leaders in the group of newly-turned outlaws 
who killed Squire Mao, she certainly would be considered at least partially 
responsible and likely would have been implicated by the local government in this 
act of vengeance. Though she did not kill the warden or Squire Mao with her own 
hand, she did lead the prison break, correct the injustice of her cousins’ 
imprisonment, allow the death of the warden Bao Ji, and enable the revenge her 
cousins and Sun Li took against Squire Mao and his household.

Although enacting vengeance is a prevalent theme in Chinese knight-
errant literature, carrying out an act of personal vengeance is not an essential 
requirement to be considered a chivalrous xia hero in every definition. Both 
Mistress Gu’s selfless bravery in rescuing her cousins and her strong desire for 
justice are consistent with the definitions of xia given by both Sima Qian and 
James J. Y. Liu, while the concept of reciprocity or vengeance that Altenburger 
defines as characteristic xia behavior fits neatly within the larger concept of 
justice. Additionally, Altenburger uses the words “violent retaliation” along with 
vengeance; while these two actions overlap in meaning, they are not identical. 
The argument could be made that Mistress Gu did not personally enact
vengeance, but her heroic actions were undoubtedly a type of violent retaliation. Vengeance is perhaps the most common way for a xia to carry out justice but is not the only way to do so; Ruhlmann mentioned that “other unconventional means” (170) aside from killing are also possible. Killing Squire Mao herself undoubtedly would have fit perfectly with typical xia behavior, but Mistress Gu’s swift action in freeing her cousins from wrongful imprisonment and saving them from undeserved execution had already corrected the injustice of their situation. If her cousins had been killed, like the father of the woman avenger in the Tang dynasty story above, killing Squire Mao and Bao Ji would have been proper vengeance. However, they were still imprisoned and had not yet been sent to be executed. In violently retaliating against the corrupt legal system, Mistress Gu had already “accomplished what [she] set out to do” (Liu 14-15). In this, her actions display more than enough chivalrous spirit; in all meaningful respects, Mistress Gu still fits the core definition of a nüxia.

The Three Warrior Women

Now that a case has been made for Mistress Gu to qualify as a nüxia, let us briefly examine the roles the three warrior women play in the rest of the novel and consider Mistress Gu’s traditional classification as a nüjiang or woman warrior-general. Following her heroic jailbreak in chapter 49, subsequent chapters record
that Mistress Gu joins the band of outlaws and participates in a battle against an enemy officer Li Cheng and his army:

Li Cheng led his entire forward army in a charge past Yu Family Hamlet. Ahead he saw banners wave, and heard yells and the thunder of drums and the crash of gongs. Another cavalry troop appeared. At the head of this one was a girl warrior, very smartly accoutred. On the red banner in front of the unit she was leading, the words *Female General Ten Feet of Steel* were inscribed in letters of gold. Mistress Gu was on her left, Sun the Witch on her right, and together they led a force of over a thousand. (Shapiro 1346-1347)

Later in chapter 71, Mistress Gu is assigned a rank and assignment alongside the other officers forming the 108 Stars of Destiny. Notably, while Hu Sanniang becomes one of the “Cavalry Liaisons Among the Three Armies,” both Mistress Gu and Sun Erniang are made “Officers in Charge of Four Information-Gathering and New Arrival-Welcoming Inns”\(^5\) (Shapiro 1507-1508), implying that they are better suited for missions involving gathering and relaying

\(^5\) Mistress Gu and her husband Sun Xin the Junior General were assigned to the Dongshan Inn, while Sun Erniang the Witch and her husband Zhang Qing the Vegetable Gardener were in charge of the Xishan Inn (Shapiro 1507).
information instead of leading troops. Later, Wu Yong and the leader of the outlaws, Song Jiang, entrust Mistress Gu to carry out a mission to deliver a message to the imprisoned Shi Jin:

We must trouble you to go into Dongping. Disguise yourself as a poor beggar woman and slip into town. If anything’s stirring, report back at once. If Shi Jin is in prison, approach one of the jailors and say you want to bring him some food, for the sake of past kindness. After you get inside, tell Shi Jin secretly: ‘We’re breaking into town the last day of the month around dusk. During the excitement, find a way to get yourself free.’ The night of the last day of the month, you, Mistress Gu, start a fire as a signal. That’s when we’ll launch our raid. (Shapiro 1469)

Wu Yong then expresses his confidence in Mistress Gu’s skills to Song Jiang: “Mistress Gu can mingle with the refugees and go in with them. No one will recognize her” (Shapiro 1469). Indeed, she did successfully disguise herself and make her way to Shi Jin’s cell, though she was unable to relay the time of the night before “the jailors drove her with blows out of the prison door” (Shapiro 1471).
It is clear why Mistress Gu has been considered a *nüjiang*: she obtains an official rank, participates in a few campaigns, and is even collectively called a *nüjiang* with the other two women leaders in the novel. However, Mistress Gu remains markedly different from her peers. Out of the three women, “Ten Feet of Steel” Hu Sanniang is clearly the one that best embodies a *nüjiang*. She is given the rank “Cavalry Liaison Among the Three Armies” and is the main leader of the cavalry troop. In other passages, her feats on the battlefield as she fights against their enemies are described in detail. On the other hand, Mistress Gu and Sun the Witch are of lesser rank, are only mentioned as being on the left and right of Ten Feet of Steel, and do not have any notable moments on the battlefield. In this, Sun Erniang the Witch does not embody a *nüjiang* nearly as fully as Ten Feet of Steel, but neither is she anything resembling a *nüxia* like Mistress Gu, since she and her husband Zhang Qing routinely drug and butcher guests that come to their inn and use their flesh as food. Mistress Gu alone embodies the traits of a female knight-errant, as leading armed cavalry into battle is clearly not her forte. She is a fearsome warrior, as demonstrated by the jailbreak, but Mistress Gu is more suited to missions involving disguise, subterfuge, and gathering information, as in the mission to deliver a message to Shi Jin and gather intelligence. Most importantly, both of these missions also included aiding those who were imprisoned, whether it be her maternal cousins or Shi Jin, which are in the realm of *xia* action and values.
Being a *nüjiang* and being a *nüxia* are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to be varying degrees of both simultaneously, though some characters embody one better than the other. Mistress Gu technically may be a *nüjiang*, but at her core she is much more of a *nüxia*. Even “Ten Feet of Steel” Hu Sanniang briefly demonstrated the *xia* quality of retribution when, in the heat of the battle and “burning with vengeance,” she attempted to avenge the death of her husband Wang Ying at the hands of Zheng Biao before being killed herself (Shapiro 2052). However, Hu Sanniang and Mistress Gu are so strikingly distinct in their personality, strengths, motivations, ranks, and roles overall that they must be recognized as different types of warrior women.

**Conclusion**

Through close analysis, it is evident that Mistress Gu exemplifies many of the core traits of knight-errantry in the Chinese tradition. Only the most overly strict definitions, minor technicalities, and questionable claims would preclude her from being considered a *nüxia*. While she did not personally kill Squire Mao or Bao Ji, she nevertheless accomplished her goal to save her cousins from unjust imprisonment and impending execution. She may have felt a familial duty to save her cousins, which does not fit Ruhlmann’s definition of a (male) *xia*; however, as Luo Manling demonstrates, avenging family members *is* a common trait for
female *xia*. Additionally, though she was acting under orders, she was willing to risk her life to disguise herself and deliver a message to Shi Jin, who was a fellow outlaw rather than a relative.

Moreover, the *xia* code, if there is one, is not rigid; it is flexible. Though Mistress Gu might not strictly apply to every possible definition of *xia*, she certainly exemplifies the spirit and essence of the female knight-errant. She embodies the main elements of *xia* that are discussed by Sima Qian and James J. Y. Liu, as well as the themes of violent retaliation against injustice and taking action when the law fails that are discussed by Altenburger and Ruhlmann. She demonstrates selfless bravery and conviction in her efforts to assist both her cousins and Shi Jin in breaking out of jail, and also embodies the themes of gender-bending strength and martial skill. These all qualify her to be considered a female knight-errant. While she is still technically also a *nüjiang* or female warrior-general, that role is much better exemplified through characters such as “Ten Feet of Steel” Hu Sanniang and the legendary figure of Mulan. Overall, the characterization of *nüxia* is much more fitting for Mistress Gu’s traits. Though she is perhaps an unconventional example of a knight-errant in some respects, Mistress Gu the Tigress is nevertheless a remarkable character worthy to be counted among the ranks of *nüxia* avengers.

References

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