Ain’t No Man: Female Masculinity in Android Game Legend of the Phoenix

Silvy Adelia¹, Hirano Shun², Dwi Kusumaningtyas³, Ephrilia Fitriana⁴, Yulia Andrianis
¹³⁴Universitas Negeri Surabaya
²Universitas Tohoku, Japan
⁵Universitas Papua
Correspondence: *silvyadelia@unesa.ac.id

Abstract
This study performs content analysis on an Android game titled Legend of the Phoenix. Legend of the Phoenix, commonly known as LoP, is an otome (girl) game released by Modo Game in 2020. Like most otome games, Legend of the Phoenix revolves around the journey of a young woman who is given a second chance at life after her first ends tragically. The player takes the role of this young woman and has to complete various missions and storylines in order to complete the game. This study aims to find messages about gender presented in the game by analyzing its visual and verbal content. It focuses on identifying female masculinity in the special recruitment group of Female General or Heroine. The game characters being analyzed are the four Generals in Legend of the Phoenix—Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu. They will be examined in terms of role, abilities, and appearance and their relation to the concept of female masculinity introduced by Halberstam. The result shows that the Female General belongs to Femme Pretender type. It means that the characters of Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu possess masculine traits while also keeping their female appearance.

Keywords: Female General, Female Masculinity, Femme Pretender, Legend of the Phoenix

INTRODUCTION

“Armed with my spear and riding on my blossom horse. Who dares say that women can’t be an official?” is one of the quotes by Qin Liangyu in Legend of the Phoenix. The game Legend of the Phoenix was developed by Modo Game and was first released for Android and iOS in 2020. Commonly abbreviated as LoP, it can be categorized as otome games. In Japanese, otome means young girl. Tanikawa and Asahi (2013) state that otome games commonly refer to
love simulation games for women. Meanwhile, Andlauer (2018) defines *otome* games that are specifically aimed at and played mainly by female players. Just like novels and movies, games also has their own genre, with *otome* being one of them. The *otome* genre originated in Japan and has been spreading to other countries in recent years. Games that belong to this genre will involve players being incarnated as the heroine who is surrounded by several potential love interests (Andlauer, 2018; Tanikawa & Asahi, 2013). Player then has to cultivate their affection and develop a relationship with the chosen male lead in order to achieve a “happy ending.”

*Legend of the Phoenix* follows these characteristics of *otome* game perfectly. The game starts with a flashback of a crying young woman. She remembers, in her previous life, helping the Crown Prince to become the emperor. He then promised to cherish and make her his queen. Yet, after ascending to the throne, he doesn’t keep his promise and even sentences her to death by drinking poisoned wine. The game follows her story—her second chance at life and getting revenge on those who have wronged her. Player takes the role of this young woman and begins their journey by joining the Imperial Place as a lowly maid. By completing daily quests, participating in events, and following the storyline, player can gather allies and love interests and go against enemies.

What makes *LoP* interesting is not only the existence of the main female character itself but also the appearance of female allies that can be recruited throughout the game. There is no denying that gender stereotypes exist even in the world of video games. Male and female characters in games are portrayed differently (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Burgess et al., 2007). Male has a higher rate of appearance and more significant roles in video games; whereas female appears less often and only possess minor roles (Burgess et al., 2007). In addition, males usually play the hero role and hold a special weapon or skill that can be used to complete a mission and/or save a damsel in distress. On the other hand, females are regulated into supporting or even submissive roles where they need the male hero to save them (Jansz & Martis, 2007). From old titles like *Super Mario Brothers* and *Donkey Kong* to recent ones like *Princess Zelda - The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, My Kingdom for the Princess IV, Save the Princess* and even *Fishdom* have followed the trope of heroes (male) saving the princess (female). Therefore, the existence of female characters who are capable of standing for themselves and helping others is quite unique.
There are more than 40 partners available through various methods of recruitment in LoP. Among the large number of partners who can be recruited (Figure 1) in *Legend of the Phoenix*, there is a particular group known as the Heroine or the Female Generals through special recruitment (Figure 2). Qin Liangyu, whose quote is mentioned above, is actually one of the Female Generals that players can get through collecting specific recruitment tokens. In addition to Qin Liangyu, there are also three other characters in the category namely Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, and Liang Hongyu. In total, there are four Female Generals that players can obtain from ranking and other major events in the game.

In the case of Female Generals in LoP, four of them is labeled as Partner who assist the player or main character in fighting enemies and completing quests. They also wear armor and carry weapons (Figure 2). The way the characters are illustrated makes the Female Generals look rather ‘manly.’ Being generals on their own, these characters can also be considered to harbor masculine traits despite being female. Generally, in *otome* games, male characters play the role of hero or potential love interest to their female counterparts. Their role as the dominant one does not derive far from the usual gender stereotypes even in the world of video games. In LoP, male characters are regulated mostly to the role of Confidant and Partner (Figure 3-5). Some of them may look manly by wearing armor or holding a sword (Figure 3); yet others may not look very manly as they are simply carrying a brush or teacup and dressed in lavish clothes (Figure 3 and 4). This brings to question what masculinity actually is and whether the quality of being masculine only belongs to men or not. Can women actually also be considered as masculine?
Masculinity is defined as traits or characteristics that are stereotypically related to males. It also refers to how society believes a man should act and look like. Wickman (2010) states that masculinity is related to males, specifically to the appearance of the muscular body and aspects of strength, endurance, and capability that males possess. However, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) believe that masculinity is flexible and dynamic. It is not something permanent that every male is born with. In Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics, Connell (2003) states that “male body does not confer masculinity.” Rather than a natural affinity, masculinity is a concept related to specific traits and physical appearance that are constructed by society and culture. In short, masculinity does not belong solely to one gender; it can differ from one particular social setting to another.

Halberstam (1998) agrees with this view; he explains that masculinity is a social construct rather than a natural one. It is something that is done or practiced continuously and not something naturally associated with the body. It is possible therefore for female to be masculine. Halberstam (1998) calls this phenomenon as ‘female masculinity.’ The term refers to how masculine traits or characteristics such as aggressiveness, strength, courage, and so on are transposed on female. Female masculinity is not simply an attempt to imitate male masculinity, but rather it is a “glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.”
(Halberstam, 1998). Some researchers like Gardiner (2012) disagrees and considers female masculinity as mere imitation of masculinity. Yet, Halberstam believes that female masculinity can be considered to be more superior to the male one as it does not put women in the position of ‘the other’, the counterpart. He then introduces five categories of female masculinity—Butch Realness, Femme Pretender, Male Mimicry, Fag Drag, and Denaturalized Masculinity.

Those categories can be explained as follows (Ginting, Thyrhay, and Perangin Angin, 2022; Halberstam, 1998):

- **Butch Realness** refers to females who want to present themselves as males; thus, they sit on the boundary between transgender and butch. Those in this category are natural females who can pass easily as a male.
- **Femme Pretender** includes performing masculine acts or adapting masculine traits but intentionally avoiding a natural masculine appearance. It means that those belonging in this category still maintain their female appearance but acts masculine.
- **Male Mimicry** indicates an attempt to take a certain form of male masculinity and try reproducing it. In this category, female truly trains to be able to play the role of a real male.
- **Fag Drag** encompasses female who develops fetish on gay male culture and would try to impersonate gay masculine men.
- **Denaturalized Masculinity** performs a more theatrical form of manliness rather than what is shown by the butch realness group. The denaturalized category, however, look further into more alternative masculinities to those already embodied by male mimicry.

This study will investigate the characters of Female General in Legend of the Phoenix and see how they work with Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity. Will they belong to one or more categories of female masculinity mentioned above? Or would they create an entirely new representation of female masculinity?

Studies on games have become quite popular lately, especially concerning gender issues. Jansz and Martis (2007), for one, have analyzed powerful female characters in video games that they dub ‘Lara phenomenon.’ Then, there are also Burgess et al. (2007) and Dill...
& Thill (2007) who explore the cover images of over 100 hundred video games to find out gender stereotypes applied to female and male characters. They conclude that gender stereotypes very much exist in the video game world. Male characters still dominate the screen and usually are the aggressive ones. Female characters are also limited in role and appearance; they are regulated to being hypersexualized and submissive. On the other hand, rather than content analysis, Tompkins and Martins (2022) focus on character design in the video game industry and discover how masculine identities and technological limitations have contributed to gender stereotypes (white male heroes, voluptuous female characters).

Nevertheless, while studies on gender and video games have been gaining popularity, little to no studies has discussed female masculinity particularly in otome games. Parvathi P K (2017) has previously analyzed female masculinity in Hunger Games series. Ginting, Zein, and Perangin Angin (2022) also dab in the female masculinity issue in the Last of Us Part II game. Both games can be categorized to be more male-oriented rather than as otome. Furthermore, these studies on female masculinity primarily focus on the appearance of the characters only; whereas, in this study, the aspects of role, abilities, and appearance are used to identify the female masculinity of the chosen characters in Legend of the Phoenix or LoP.

Schultz, Moore, and Spitzberg (2014) state that content analysis is a method that can be used to understand messages related to gender in media. This study performs content analysis on Legend of the Phoenix and aims to find out messages about gender presented in the game by analyzing its content. It focuses on identifying female masculinity in the special recruitment group of Female General characters (Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu). It explores three main aspects: role, abilities, and appearance in identifying the specific type of female masculinity they present based on the concept of female masculinity by Halberstam (1998).

DISCUSSION

What kind of character do you usually play in games? Is it the strong and bulky male hero or the beautiful and sexy female healer? Nowadays, people are exposed to various types of media from all over the world. From traditional ones such as magazines and newspapers to digital ones like web novels and video games, thousands of people are accessing them every day and encountering certain messages, meanings, and ideologies. These values are
(in)directly passed to those playing the game and shape their view. For instance, Paasfen et al. (2017) has done research on gendered gamer stereotype. The male gamer stereotype, enforced by game storyline and professional figures in gaming industry that are all dominated by males, forms the belief that games are made by and solely played by males. Such belief can harm female game players who have been rising in number over the years. What started simply as a gender stereotype in games can eventually be regarded as norms and influence real world.

Gender is a concept constructed by society to differentiate between male and female. Media portrays behavioral norms for both genders, and they may affect the behaviors and attitudes of people who see them regularly (Paek et al., 2011). People would then develop stereotypical beliefs about certain genders according to what they see in the media and imitate them whether in the forms of behavior or appearance (Coyne et al., 2014). Is it normal to see a blonde haired man wearing armor and fighting a demon lord in a video game? Most people would say yes. The same thing applies to seeing a woman in the back of a party and protected by other characters in a video game. It is normal to encounter such a view in a game. But how about seeing a group of female characters wearing armor and carrying a weapon to fight alongside the player? Such a scene is a bit unusual, yet this is what the Female General in LoP is about.

**Female General in the Legend of the Phoenix**

The group known as Female General or Heroine in *Legend of the Phoenix* consists of four characters: Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu. Those four are influential female figures in Chinese history (Edwards, 2011; Hung, 1989). Hua Mulan, from the Mullan Ballad or Song of Mulan (Tian & Xiong, 2013), is probably the most well-known among the four. She disguises herself as a man and joins the army in place of her father. Then, Liang Hongyu is based on a real Song female warrior who fights against the invading Jin army. On the other hand, Qin Liangyu is a Ming General best known for defending her country from Manchu invasion. Finally, Mu Guiying contributed in staging a resistance against Western Xia.

In *LoP*, the four characters can be recruited using 10 Female General tokens (Figure 6) or combining 100 Female General token shards (Figure 7). The Female General possesses
stats higher than partners recruited through normal recruitment. They can also be upgraded using Female General token in order to raise their stats in the game.

Figure 6 Female General Token  Figure 7 Female General Token Shard

The Female General are illustrated as attractive female warriors who are “no inferior to men.” Based on the concept of female masculinity by Halberstam (1998), the characters of Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu belong to the Femme Pretender category. It means that they do perform or adapt masculine traits, but in matter of appearance, they still retain their female appearance and do not resemble a man. The details of which is discussed in the following sections.

Female Masculinity in Role

In terms of role, characters from Female General group all possess the same role of being Partner (allies) to the player. In terms of rank in society, as a General, they are all also quite influential. General is a position of high rank in the army. Historically speaking, this position has always been dominated by male. It is extremely rare even today for female to sit in such high-ranking position.

The game setting of Legend of the Phoenix is based on ancient China, where female did not have favorable standing. Most usually stayed at home, taking lessons on how to be a good wife to their future husband. Although there have been some influential female Figures (Hung, 1989), generally female are not allowed to join the army. Tian and Xiong (2013) states that in feudal China, female were confined to take care of household affairs including cooking and weaving. Therefore, it is interesting to see that the characters of Heroine group all possess the title as a General, a position predominantly held by males.

The position of army general can be achieved by anyone (both noble and commoner) with a considerable amount of accomplishment and merit. Those who are noble by birth are often considered to rank higher than the commoners who manage to rise through ranks by
achievement. One of the heroines, Hua Mulan, for instance, manages to rise to the position of General after managing to protect her country. Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu also all accomplished similar deeds and defended their country against the foreign invaders. For their achievements, these four are not rewarded the title of Empress or Princess, which is normally given to female, but they become a General. It shows that the group embodies a trait or rather a title that is quite masculine. As an army general, Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu also possess abilities befitting to their role.

**Female Masculinity in abilities**

In relation to the previous section, as Female General, Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu are undoubtedly skilled in several areas just like their male counterparts do. Their abilities in *LoP* can be categorized as follows:

![Diagram showing abilities](image)

**Figure 8** Female General’s abilities

First, weapon mastery and martial arts, each Heroine is shown to be holding a specific type of weapon in their character illustration. Hua Mulan is holding a large broadsword resembling a buster sword (Figure 9). Then, Mu Guiying looks battle ready with her dagger (Figure 10), Liang Hongyu with her bow (Figure 11), and Qin Liangyu with her spear (Figure 12).

![Images of Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying](images)

**Figure 9** Hua Mulan  
**Figure 10** Mu Guiying
On a separate occasion in *LoP*, each General has made a statement regarding their skills with the chosen weapon. Mu Guiying explains that her sword can take on millions in addition to being able to drive away the “foreign clowns.” Liang Hongyu also shows how she used her “trusty bow” to defend her country. All of these imply that the Female General can fight, using martial arts with or without a weapon.

In addition to weapon mastery, the Heroines are capable of riding horses on their own. In the beginning, Qin Liangyu already states, “[a]rmed with my spear and riding on my blossom horse…” which shows her ability in horse riding. Furthermore, during her first meeting with Hua Mulan, the player (main character) comments on Mulan’s riding ability “[d]ashing through the mountains to reach the battlefield.” Similarly, Liang Hongyu also says that she is capable of “[d]efending my country valiantly with my trusty bow and horse.” The rests of Female General also show similar ability in horse riding as benefited to their position.

Lastly, a general must possess knowledge about warfare and military. In *LoP*, Hua Mulan has said to the player (Figure 13), “If you ever get interested in the way of the army, come find me.”
It implies that Mulan understands how the army works in and out of a battle. Having been part of the army to replace his father in the beginning. Mulan climbed her way up from a foot soldier to an army General due to her excellent achievement. Similar to her, Mu Guiying is also said to be a female General with many achievements. Her command of the imperial army is pretty famous as well as her feat in battle and diplomatic missions. In one of her dialogues, Liang Hongyu also explains how she manages to defend her country and drum up the “soldiers’ morale to halt the progress of the Tartar’s army.” They would not be able to achieve such a feat if they know nothing about the army or war.

All abilities as mentioned above (weapon mastery, martial arts, horse riding, military knowledge, and warfare) are abilities that males commonly possess, especially for those who are part of the army. By having those abilities, the Female General has embodied masculine traits despite being female. The group does not only hold the position of General in name only, but they also show impressive abilities (that their male colleagues may or may not have) befitting of their position.

**Female Masculinity in appearance**

Both females and males are expected to adhere to socially constructed gender norms even in games. From the way one dresses to the way one behaves should be in line to the expected gender role and norm. Traditionally, females are expected to show feminine traits such as submissive, gentle, weak, nurturing, sensitive, dependent, and the like; whereas male is expected to show masculine traits such as strong, brave, intelligent, independent, assertive, and unemotional (Ab Rashid et al., 2016; Andalas & Budi Qur’ani, 2019; England et al., 2011; K, 2017; Louie, 2012; Miller et al., 2016; Nakamura & Matsuo, 2005). They are also expected to dress as such; female is identical with dresses, skirts, and slips whereas male with pants, shirts, and suits. Femininity and masculinity refer to the way society’s perspective in how a man be a man and how woman be a woman. This section discusses how the Female General present themselves in matter of appearance—are they going to be masculine and dress like a man?

All characters in the Female General group are illustrated as a group of attractive females wearing armor and carrying a weapon, although their armor is vastly different from their male counterparts in the game as well as the ancient Chinese armor (Adams et al., 2003;
Dien, 1981; Ding, 2005; Garrett, 2007). Duke Jing (Figure 14) and Prince Liang (Figure 15), male characters from the special recruitment option in LoP, are also shown wearing armor in their character illustrations. The armor they use is called brigandines, which was commonly used during the Qing dynasty (Adams et al., 2003; Garrett, 2007; Lai & Su, 2017). The full-body armor covers its user from head to toe and protects him from attacks.

![Figure 14 Duke Jing](image1.png) ![Figure 15 Prince Lian](image2.png)

In games, female characters are often hypersexualized and associated with sexiness (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Fisher, 2015). They are usually scantily clad or shown wearing revealing clothes that show their body shape and emphasize sexiness. Unlike Duke Jing and Prince Liang who wear full-body armor, Female General’s armor seems to leave many areas uncovered. Their armor is pretty tight and form-fitting as shown below (Figure 16-19).
Hua Mulan (Figure 16) is dressed in a combination of silver and red. She wears formfitting silver armor that covers the upper part of her body and arms as well as a long red dress with four (two front and two back) slits that go from her upper tight to her knee. Next is Mu Guiying. Armed with a short dagger, General Mu (Figure 17) dons a white and dark green robe and black inner clothes. Her robe is loosely held by silver hip armor and black belt, leaving her milky white tights exposed. She only has some pieces of armor on her body—right arm, right hip, and left shoulder. Hongyu’s outfit is almost similar to Mulan, except she is dressed mainly in orange and gold (Figure 18). In addition, her long dress only has two front slits instead of four. Last, Liangyu’s upper body is completely encased in purple.
and silver armor (Figure 19). Her armor looks the most complete as it covers her arms and front entirely. Like Mulan and Hongyu, she also wears a long purple dress with two front slits.

The Female General group shares similar characteristics regarding their attire. First, their dress or robe has strategically placed strips, either on the side, front, or back, displaying milky white legs. Second, all their outfits are form-fitting and clearly show their body’s shape. Third, they only use small pieces of armor rather than full-body ones like their male counterparts do. Fourth, all of them wear knee-high stiletto boots with their armor.

Given their position as an army general, the outfit they wear may not be functional in a real battle. It does not fully cover them. Also, compared to the ancient Chinese armor or even the armor worn by male characters (Figure 14 and 15), the Female General’s armor is severely lacking. Of course, it will be different if the purpose of their armor is not to protect them against their enemies but to seduce them. The outfit worn by Hua Mulan and other generals shows a perfect balance of elegance, sexiness, and danger. The exposed leg created by the slits especially allows these female warriors a wide range of movement in battles. It, however, also shows the player (and audience) eye candy during the game. This presents the Female General as a group of sexy and alluring female characters but very dangerous given their abilities.

CONCLUSION

The Female General characters—Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyu, and Qin Liangyu—can be categorized as Femme Pretender, according to Halberstam’s (1998) female masculinity concept. While they embody masculine traits through their role as an army General and its related abilities (weapon mastery, martial arts, horse riding, military knowledge, and warfare), their appearance remains female. They do not change their appearance to resemble that of a man. Nevertheless, in maintaining this female appearance, they still fall victim to gender stereotypes in terms of female characters’ appearance in video games. The outfit they wear emphasizes their attractive figure and may not be very practical in battles.
REFERENCES


