

Disney's Reconstruction of the Traditional Chinese Heroine: a Comparative Analysis of the Three Mulan Movies

Ewen Xiao*

Institute of Mass Communication, Shenzhen University, 3699 Nanhai Ave, Shenzhen, China

erwenshaw@163.com

**corresponding author*

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Abstract: The legend of Mulan has been transmitted and remolded throughout China for hundreds of years. In recent years, this motif has also drawn significant attention from the US film industry. Three films are analyzed in this article: the Chinese Yu opera Hua Mulan [1], Disney's animated version Mulan [2] and the most recent addition, Disney's live-action version Mulan [3]. Under a cross-culture lens, the analysis compares three versions of the film to examine the transculturation and adaption of the narrative in reconstructing a traditional Chinese heroine. This paper concludes that to resist cultural hegemony and to attract a broader audience, Disney's 1998 version transforms a typical Confucian heroine into an individualistic American heroine. Finally, it shall be argued that the 2020 version of Mulan espouses and shapes Mulan into a synthesized Asian-American figure.

1. Introduction

Disney has long been revisiting and revising classic folktales and legends from numerous world civilizations. It's aims to produce films that cater to a global taste as a response to growing multiculturalism. The animated version of Mulan [2] is an example of this and has achieved tremendous success. The new live-action remake of Mulan in 2020 is an obvious endeavour to produce the next blockbuster. While Disney had to adapt the original narrative to appeal to a Chinese audience, as China holds the second largest stature within the global film market. A huge amount of effort was orchestrated by Disney's large production team to create narrative that translates well, attempting to infuse the film with a great amount of fidelity toward the original Chinese legend; the end result proved underwhelming after release in China and scored 5/10 on Douban (the most popular film review website in China). Many reviewers criticize Disney's handling of Chinese traditional values and its depiction of feminism within the film. Scholarly interest was also triggered because of the cultural adaptation and transformations in cross-cultural film production. This essay will specifically focus on analysing the narration of constructing a heroine within the 3 different versions of Mulan.

Before going further into the comparison and analysis of the narration within the films, it should be noted that the basic story line of the movie is derived from the Chinese poem 'Ballad of Mulan' which was written in the Northern Dynasties (386-581). The premise portrays a filial daughter who disguises herself as a man to join the army in lieu of her father. The fundamental gender issue and the tension inherent in the ballad inspires plentiful recreation of the heroine in literary works and

film-television programs throughout China for hundreds of years. The famous Yu opera Hua Mulan produced in 1956 is selected because the film is widely regarded as a politically and culturally influential remodelling of Mulan since the establishment of People's Republic of China. Triangulating its narration with Disney's two movies that are based on the ballad would provide a closer cross-cultural view on how the oriental cultural elements are selectively abstracted from its original context and injected into western culture myths and ideologies. In other words, an analysis of the specific process of transculturation, namely how Chinese cultural myths and traditional values are decontextualized, westernized and assimilated in cross-cultural communication will be demonstrated.

2. Literature Review

As a global media giant and an effective shaper of popular culture, Disney and its cultural production has drawn significant academic interest from scholars worldwide. The scholarly interest on Disney's culture production can be roughly categorized into several main areas such as: culture studies, gender studies, education, politics, aesthetics, discourse analysis, film studies, etc. [4] The literature relevant to the film Mulan, mainly belongs to gender and cultural studies.

One of the most intriguing elements that makes Mulan so responsive to gender studies is its theme of gender crossing and its invocation of a certain feminist consciousness. Nguyen contends that despite the incorporation of gender equality notions within the film, Mulan is confined and compounded into a pastiche of femininity that does not profoundly challenge normative patriarchal ideologies. [5] Laurel Dundes and Madeline Streiff posit a similar view, suggesting that the narrative in the film is replete with stereotypical gender tropes. [6] For instance, once Mulan leaves her masculine embodiment, she transforms back into a woman, illustrated as without agency, retreating to passivity and conformity even after she wins valour and glory in the battlefield; successfully embodying immaterial and material masculine qualities. Another study closely related to the refiguration of Disney's heroine includes Lisa Brocklebank question of whether Mulan is a "true" deconstructed heroine that is different from Disney 's past paradigm of heroines like snow white and Cinderella. [7] The author argues that the movie harnesses many narratives which derive from cross-dressed tales and it deconstructs gender binarism's. However, the refiguration may simply shift from one prescribed pattern of behaviour to another and is nothing profoundly liberating.

Since Disney has a perennial tradition to adapt classic folktales and legends from other cultures to attract a global audience, another academic focus details the analysis of cultural transformation within its films. In the process of cultural transformation, Disney transforms the filial, self-sacrificing heroine in the Chinese ballad into an individualistic girl who is desperate to "find herself". [8] As Lan Dong points out, the film celebrates the value and culture of the American "self" rather than the Chinese "other" in order to attract international and American audience. [9] Disney's recreation of the heroine is far from being authentic and accurate. The film strengthens the existing racial and gender ideologies through deprecating Chinese culture as an Oriental despotism and dissolving feminism into the cultural/racial hierarchy. [10] However, ZhuoYi .Wang holds that while the previous critical academic work on Mulan provides insightful criticism of Disney's cultural appropriation and Orientalism inherent in the film, it often assumes a static and unified entity of the legend, thus ironically strengthens the Orientalist paradigm as the Chinese hypo-text is based on the accumulated conflicting recreation of Mulan with no distinct point of origin. [11] Further, Hsieh and Matoush examine the historical evolution of the legend Mulan and argue that in the children's literature, whether Mulan is featured as an self-seeking girl, an independent woman warrior or a filial daughter, it indeed "raises issues of insider versus outsider authorship and appears

to signal divergent attitudes toward the audience's ability to make sense of socio-cultural diversity and power relationships". [12]

3. The Narrative of the Heroine's Motivation

Motivation that is based on widely accepted moral patterns and cultural myth plays an instrumental role in constructing a compelling and believable hero. Cross cultural film production inevitably entails cultural transformation in its aim of crafting reliable and authentic motivations for the protagonist. In the comparison of the three films, it can be argued that self-discipline, self-substantiating and self-actualisation are hierarchically presented as the operative drives that impel the heroic deeds of the heroine.

Scene one of the Yu opera *Hua Mulan* [1] delivers an account that illustrates the drive beneath Mulan's being: loyalty and filial piety. It opens with a domestic scene that Mulan receives a conscription decree, ordering her elderly and feeble father to fight against the northern invaders. Mulan sings with a worrying face: "How can my elderly father to fight the invaders. How I hate the enemies violate the border and harass my country people. Even though I practiced martial arts since I was little, how woeful I can't fight in my father's place because I am a girl" (translated by author). The libretto shows her deep concern for her father's well-being and infers Mulan's subsequent heroic decision to disguise herself as man to join the army in lieu of her father. Mulan here is prompted by selfless motivation. Ho argues that authoritarian moralism is a central characteristic of the Chinese pattern of socialization moulded by the moral imperative of filial piety. [13] Individual value is chiefly based on whether one performs one's obligation for the family and society. Mulan's family obligation entails that she is obliged to serve her father by showing absolute care, reverence and support. Her conformity and performance of filial duty towards her parents is a central virtue of a Confucian heroine. To some extent, it is an obligatory deference in traditional patriarchal Chinese society.

For a Confucian hero, loyalty to the king is eminently embodied as serving your country, imbued with selfless motivations whenever required. Mulan here takes the role of the eldest son in the family to perform military service when her country is in peril. In persuading her father to permit her to join the army, Mulan enumerates four examples of legendary heroines in Chinese history: the concubine soldiers in WU State, the woman leader Xun Guan, the female generals in Yang family and Empress Feng. These influential Chinese women icons are all combat-worthy and perform heroic deeds, which also epitomizes the traditional orthodox Confucian ethic - devotion and loyalty to your emperor and country. Knowing the full risk and consequences of her actions, Mulan is yet driven by her obligation. It can be argued that, in the narrative of constructing the heroine, though filial sentiment is naturally presented, Mulan is still bound by her external motivations. Her value is more earned than innate as her decision is not prompted by self-fulfilment or concern for her own self-esteem or glory, but rather, more generated from moral self-discipline.

Unlike the classic Yu opera produced in 1950's China, in Disney's 1998 animated version of *Mulan*, the narrative shifts to highlight how Mulan is clumsily defying traditional social norms, family expectations and vaguely motivated by her own inner desire of self-substantiation. For instance, In the scene when Mushu tries to console Mulan after she was expelled from army for concealing her female identity, Mushu says: "you went to save your father's life at least you had good intentions" and Mulan replies: "Maybe I didn't go for my father, maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right, so when I looked in the mirror, I would see someone worthwhile." In this very moment Mulan realizes her love for father or "filial piety" is not the operative modality which led her into war. She admits she left for herself. Though failed in the bridal test, she can prove herself by taking the male duty as a warrior, but not by marriage. The dialogue lucidly reflects how Disney's narrative conceptualizes a heroine in terms of motivation

which accentuates the typical American “self”. The animated version is strikingly different from the Yu opera in demonstrating how Mulan leaves home. The Yu opera spares nearly 13 minutes in featuring Mulan ‘s convincing her father that she is a qualified warrior to acquire his approval. In Disney’s version, Mulan leaves home in a clandestine manner regardless of her father’s implacable objection. The “Chinese Mulan” incorporates the Confucian value of “obedience to parents” and chiefly acts out fulfilling her moral duties. Disney’s narrative instead interprets the theme from a western perspective to associate self-actualization solely within individuated existence. As consciously splitting from the collective (family), Disney’s Mulan is a rambunctious and individual-minded heroine who is not motivated by the need of suppressing her interest for the well-being of the family and country but rather her yearning to be truly recognized and distinguished.

The live-action version released in 2020 reveals more intricately the tension and reconciliation between Hua Zhou’s (Mulan) motivation of upholding her Confucian virtues and to be true to herself for the purpose of attaining a more holistic state of self-fulfilment. There is a scene which delivers an implicit account of what motivates the heroine’s daring move: Hua Zhou draws the sword from its sheath, it is shown to the audience three characters etched on her family sword: Loyal, brave, and true. She then bows deeply to her ancestors’ memorial tablet and leaves home without bidding farewell to her father. Disney does not dismiss the essence of self-abnegation and self-sacrificing of the “Chinese Mulan, yet instead, strives to resolve the inner dilemma of the heroine – the transforming of conflicting motivational forces into one of harmony and synergy. Being loyal is the main tenant that centres on fulfilling the moral duty for family and country. However, being brave is the inner drive that facilitates Mulan’s bold move. Being true, or “to thine own self be true” is a Eurocentric conception upon which a popular American cultural myth based: a hero can conquer any adversaries by bravely being himself/herself. [14] Obviously, Hua Zhou’s gender bars her from being true in the army leaving her needing to coordinate with many inner antagonisms: the contradiction between the individual self and the selfless self for acquiring a holistic and profound self-fulfilment. Though the live-action version fails in resonating well with a Chinese audience, it evidently endeavours to break up the univocal narrative of self-substantiating under a western perspective within the animated version and yields a framework for integrating Hua Zhou’s communal pursuit with her ‘true self’.

4. The Narrative of the Heroine’s Development

4.1. The Narration of the Heroine Morality

Without any contextual mise en scene, Mulan in the 1956 Chinese version is automatically inculcated, within the first scene as an exemplary moral model who possesses all of the classical tropes of a Confucian heroine. In the scenario of the marital skills competition, the opera takes a large number of full shots to highlight that Mulan’s dexterous swordsmanship is far above of her father’s. It shown to the audience that her swordsmanship is consummate and does not need to be honed for the incoming war. In classic Confucian narrative, heaven overrules human efforts and bestows onto the earth the “son of heaven” to rule its people. “Son of heaven” (the emperor) is the divined individual who embodies and practices impeccable moral standards (or heaven would revoke its mandate). [15] The great hero narrative derives from this prevailing traditional cultural myth. Heroes in Chinese classics are usually manifested as semi-divine figures to assist and consolidate the sovereignty of the emperor. Here, Mulan has been portrayed as a supremely gifted prodigy and a clean-cut moral heroine who is self-consciously aware of her direction and obligation. She immediately proceeds onto her course of action as a competent warrior and a filial daughter. No tragic weaknesses or inner self-confrontation is shown in her character that might bring about

consequent failure. As the fundamental heroine, Mulan takes the high moral ground from the beginning, and outsmarts both her male allies and the villain till the end.

Contrast to the opera, the Disney animated version, renders Mulan as a flawed and tomboyish girl who disgraces her family in the bridal test as her qualities are incongruous with that of an idealised Chinese wife. She writes cheat notes on her arm for answering the match maker's questions and she makes a mess at home when doing house chores. Unlike the self-affirming image in the opera, Mulan's inner dialectical confrontation is highlighted: "while looking at her reflection in the pond, Mulan sings:" "Who is that girl I see, staring straight back at me? Why is my reflection someone I don't know? Somehow, I cannot hide who I am, though I have tried. When will my reflection show who I am inside?". [16] Mulan is not a morally impeccable girl, which is also reflected in the narrative in which she violates her father's wish and steals his sword to run away as a disobedient daughter. In addition, within the traditional Chinese system of morals, Mulan's individualistic pursuit of self-substantiation can be perceived as an inferior cause compared to the altruistic goal of improving the welfare for society. However, self-determination and actualization are definitely a moral landmark of contemporary American ethics. In reconstructing an ideal heroine, this moral discrepancy is rooted deeply within Disney's ethos in using transculturation to address its core moral element. Transculturation involves both organisational routines and experimentation through which foreign culture is decontextualized, essentialised, recontextualised, domesticated and sometimes universalised. [17]

In the recent live-action version, it is clear that Disney's modus operandi is to reconcile the Disney feminist icon with the Chinese Confucian heroine. Compared to the animated version, Huazhou now has longer hair. She is much less clumsy and more of a warrior who retains the wit and courage in the former version but newly empowered with 'chi', the overwhelming energy that enables her to surpass her peers. In addition, though Huazhou disobeys her father, the new character Command Tung serves as a father figure to mentor and encourage her in the army. These changes reflect Disney's effort to integrate the Confucian doctrines within their overarching framework that strives to inject Disney heroines with an independent attitude. As the producer Jason Reed says in Wendy Lee's interview:

"What we realized as we're looking through it is that while it's a story of an individual finding their true self and finding their inner truth, but ultimately she's doing that in service of the Confucian ideal so she is finding a way to do her duty but she can't do it in the way that young girls were normally expected to, so she finds her own way against the norms of society but ultimately fulfils her destiny."

In deliberately balancing the near-opposing moral tenets of Chinese and American audiences, Huazhou is created more like an Asian-American heroine.

4.2. The Narration of the Heroine Femininity

Masculinity has long been deemed as the unequivocal symbol of strength and courage. In the Yu opera, Hua Mulan [1], the narration and transmission of female power can be concluded as masculinity as the heroine assumes typically conforms to those binary gender boundaries. The opera produced in 1956 successfully cashed in on the prevailing discourse "women hold up half the sky" and "iron girls" which initially proclaimed by Mao Zedong. The discourse holds the belief that women can indeed do as men can and are an available resource to be deployed outside of the domestic sphere to make a contribution to society. Mulan in this opera can be perceived as the prologue of the "iron girl" archetype. "Iron girls" is a unique and widely-accepted metaphor in China to represent a group of women "who were often tall, sturdy and able to do heavy physical work at the site of farmland, factories or engineering projects, and were recognized as the typical outstanding women from 1950s to 1970s". [18] "Iron girls" are obviously a desirable force to "hold

up half the sky for ‘new China’”, as depicted by Chang Xiangyu, the “queen of the Yu opera” who performs as Mulan. In the film, she defies the conventional somatic aesthetics of women in China, possessing a sturdy shape and high-pitched voice.

In the scene of Mulan’s father showing her how to behave like a man in camouflage, he is amazed by Mulan’s awe-inspiring masculine appearance while fitting her armour: “My daughter is a so manly woman”. Mulan becomes feminine when she dressed as a woman, but when she dressed in armour, she takes on masculine mannerisms. The armour acts as the tool in which her gender is exteriorised and performed. Also, in this opera Chang Xiangyu sings one of the most classic arias in contemporary China with her triumphant and sonorous voice – ‘Who Said Women are Inferior to Men’, which has been widely sung to date. In cross-dressing, Mulan in this version strives to acquire a powerful male identity by forsaking her femininity and imitating masculine demeanour. Consequently, the narration and transmission of constructing an ideal heroine is brought into the grand narrative schemas of gender equality in China.

Unlike in the opera where Mulan is featured as filial daughter who is happy with her domestic chores from the first scene, Mulan in the animated version is rendered as a vibrant and spunky girl with healthy-looking tanned skin and who is half-hearted with the womanly work. She is created intentionally to break the stereotypical mould of a Disney princess who are typically fragile, meek, helpless and ultimately require salvation from a male character. Though rambunctious and bursting with vitality, Mulan is not a born heroine. She is a mortal girl who fails to bring honour to her family in the bridal selection for being ‘too skinny’ and clumsy (not because she is unfeminine). In the camp, Mulan also struggles in vain to gain boastful gruffness for being looked upon as masculine by the other male soldiers. However, Mu Shu’s clever tricks and her own resourcefulness and wit compensates her lack of physical strength. By defying all odds laid against her, Mulan rescues the emperor and the male protagonist, somewhat inverting traditional Disney narratives. In the live-action version, Mulan is not physically imposing but extraordinarily gifted with ‘chi’, a mystic energy that can significantly augment her physical abilities. This is manifested by Mulan’s skilful gutter sliding and roof-top leaping. ‘Chi’ in Chinese philosophy is a vital circulating force that balances “Yin & Yang” (feminine and masculine energies).

With a slender figure and delicate feminine facial features, the actress Liu Yifei is known as the ‘fairy sister’ in China as she is very in line with traditional aesthetic beauty standards. In ancient China, fair skin, soft curve indicates a woman who leads a sheltered and unlaboured life and poses no threat to society and one’s skin complexion can suggest what class one belongs to. By empowering the tender Mulan with mystic energy, Disney has attempted to demonstrate that women can retain their feminine traits and no longer need to cater to masculine ideals of physical strength to succeed. Disney grafts the Chinese concept of ‘chi’ onto the popular American narrative ‘women’s empowerment’ to reconstruct an exemplary heroine and attract broader audiences. However, the incondite approach to power Mulan up undermines the film’s moral. Instead, this fetishized and insincere attempt to empower Mulan, weakens Mulan’s agency and “has turned chi into an East Asian version of the Force from Star Wars”. [19]

4.3. The Narration of the Heroine Mentality

To create a compelling and relatable heroine, demonstrating the process of the heroine’s mental transformation is quintessential. In the Yu opera, Mulan escapes from her gender expectations as a domesticated woman but become ensnared in another form of prescribed behaviour - to display masculine attributes such as aggressiveness and competitiveness. It seems the only way for Mulan to become a heroine is to first to become a hero. The two roles are mutually exclusive and cannot harmoniously coexist in her psyche. Mulan’s mental transformation is featured quite arbitrarily and abruptly, as if it is imperative defence mechanism for the incoming crisis. Hardly any of her

normative gender role discrepancies and conflicts are manifested and she is depicted as a heroine with a consistent, absolute positive mental state; with no shadows or 'inner demons'. There are also no treacherous self-discovery tunnels for her to wade through and all she needs to battle are the outer villains. Mulan confronts little distress that caused by the gender nonconformity because she successfully conceals her gender identity within the army until she returns home.

In the animated version, Mulan's mental struggle is highlighted. In the scene where she sings the 'Reflection' song, Mulan gazes into her reflection and pontificates on the image that stares back at her, namely, Mulan's true self which has been denied and repressed. Mulan's struggle in the opera chiefly resides in between accepting her innermost desire and her assigned role in society, but not between to act in accordance with feminine and masculine qualities. Mulan in the animated version is not passive and reluctant in the situation but a willing participant in her heroic adventure. Her desire of acting true leads her toward a journey of self-exploration that eventually promotes her self-growth. However, the process of her mentor transformation is portrayed one-dimensional as Mulan is not strives to integrate her societal self with the 'true self', but to reclaim her authentic self. The narration echoes popular American discourse of realizing one's true talents. It is one of the western views of "seeing the Self is through its force as a predestined conclusion. A person will be able to accomplish what is imprinted within him or her, and this imprinting suggests a unique potentiality in each individual". [20] Mulan's bold move can be seen as an inward journey of her predestined true self, relentlessly achieving its full aptitude and fighting for recognition.

In the live action version, the narration of Mulan's mental transformation is shown as taking place through the multitude of differing processes of her total experience. Her being is strengthened and integrated by the increased autonomy and insight produced by her experience of balancing her self-confrontation. Mulan's 'chi' is used as one of the narrative crutches. In the first half of the movie, she struggles to hide her chi and as soon as she can embrace and accept her gift, Mulan attains a more powerful new self. Throughout her process of self-growth, the antagonist, witch Xiangniang is created as a malevolent entity to drive her towards individuation. In the western hero narrative, the villain is often portrayed as the projected shadow of the hero. The conception of the projected shadow is a Jungian notion that often transposes onto the hero's journey for balancing the one-sided virtues of the hero in American film. Xiangniang symbolizes the shadow that dwells in the deep layer of Mulan's unconscious world and she tells Mulan that hiding her true identity would weaken her and corrupt her chi. Mulan also sees the dark and destructive power of the chi from Xiangniang. Her role of mentoring Mulan represents "the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality". [21] Uniting the inner opposites is a classic narratology for demonstrating the self-growth of the hero in American movies. The opposites in Mulan also included her inner woman under her masquerade of man and her inner masculinity beneath her femininity.

Within the live action feature, there is a striking change of how Mulan exposes her female identity compared to the animated version. In the 1998 version, Mulan's identity was discovered accidentally by a doctor after treating her injuries. She was subsequently dragged out of a medical tent and expelled from the army for her concealment and dishonesty. However, in the live-action version, there is an iconic scene to manifest that Mulan willingly pulls down her long hair, doffs her martial attire on the horse and to fight the invaders as a woman warrior. As the voice-over narrator makes clear to the audience: "Huajun did die, for a lie can only live so long, but Mulan, Mulan lived". Mulan develops empowerment and finally acts out of a true and unified self. Disney intends to reconstruct Mulan closer to the original heroine in the Chinese poem "Ballad of Muan" by transforming her individual self to an all-embracing self that encompasses other modalities of being. Obviously, Disney has good intentions to remake a heroine that would appeal to both audiences, but

it doesn't quite reach its potential as it stiffly transplants stereotypical conjectures about ancient China into popular American ideologies.

5. Conclusion

Through the comparison of the three films, it can be seen how the original Chinese narrative, 'The Ballad of Mulan' has transformed and adapted within different cultural contexts for reconstructing a heroine that would attract audiences and to serve as a symbolic resource to be weaved into a grand socio-culture fabric. In the Yu opera, it retains the core tenet of Confucianism. Mulan is constructed as a filial heroine who strives to fulfill her moral duties. Meanwhile, the transformed narrative also echoes the epochal political discourse of 'Iron Girl' in 1950's-1970's China. The popularity of the opera also indicates a culturally authentic and germane adaptation. The Disney's animated version at its core, transforms the narrative into the Disney formula of an individualistic American heroine who overcomes overwhelming odds. This version appropriates classic Chinese visual elements and symbols, but the narrative still remains true to western ideologies. To resist the cultural hegemony and to attract a broader audience, Disney's live action version remodels the heroine in an attempt to restore the cultural authenticity of the Chinese legend by demarginalizing the oppressed narratives. Mulan is narrated as a heroine who synthesizes her individual and true self with an all-embracing self that encompasses the well-being of others. Disney strives to reconstruct a heroine that would appeal to Chinese and American audiences but fails both due to it forcefully interpolate its stereotypical understanding of Chinese culture elements into western ideologies. The live action version fails to reach its potential in transculturation and Mulan becomes a nondescript, generic and synthetic Asian-American figure. This analysis reflects a dilemma that when film products integrate its narrative with native cultural repertoire, it is easier to achieve market success and culture acceptance. However, for the transculturation within the film between different culture contexts, there is still a long way worth exploring.

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