

Making and Breaking a Heroine:

Cultural Disparity in *Mulan*

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The concept of the hero is one that has existed for as long as the art of storytelling has been around and is a component of many human cultures. It is one of the strongest “fairytale” archetypes, often embodying every characteristic that a given culture values and conveniently wrapped up in one ideal figure: an object of admiration and aspiration.¹ Every group and era in human history has had its heroes or heroines who have gone down in history as the shining stars of those groups, conquering adversaries through wit, cunning, and strength; winning the hearts of strangers they meet through hard work, kindness, and “correct behavior.”² Families and communities pass down hero stories and legends to remind their descendants of what makes a hero—what makes up the best person. A well-known heroine of Asia is Hua Mulan, the Chinese girl warrior who risked her life in order to protect her father’s. Her story, originally told in the form of a ballad, was animated in Disney’s 1998 feature film *Mulan*. However, what arises in Disney’s retelling is not the bold Asian woman who joined the army in place of her father, but, by Disney’s hand, the girl who abandons the Chinese tradition of filial piety in favor of living through individualism, a Western ideal. Still, Mulan’s situation is recognizable for first- and second-generation Asian immigrants to America due to its timely release in the late twentieth century following a dramatic increase in Asian immigration to the United States. The subtle racism and whitewashing in *Mulan* causes the film adaptation to lose some of the cultural significance of the original ballad and permanently modifies Mulan to reflect more Western values. This essay will discuss the original “Ballad of Mulan,” the history and significance of cross-dressing in Chinese culture, the liberties that Disney took in *Mulan* to alter history and distort Chinese history, and

1 Benjamin S. Keefer, “Go The Distance: The Hero’s Journey,” *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal* 58, no. 3 (2016): 8.

2 Molly Kaushal, “Crossing Seven Seas: The Hero’s Quest in Oral Narratives,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2003): 57.

finally, the impact that *Mulan* has on bridging the gap between tradition and coming of age.

The “Ballad of Mulan,” a poem composed in the style of a folk song, first appeared between the fifth and sixth centuries CE in the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China at a time when the Northern sector was engaged in a series of wars against foreign invaders.³ The narrative unfolds in fourteen stanzas, telling of an “ordinary young woman who rises under extraordinary circumstances in order to spare her father the hardship and danger of fighting in the war.”⁴ In the ballad, the only reason given for Mulan’s desire to serve in the army is to make sure that her father does not. She disguises herself as a man and fights for ten years, after which she declines the emperor’s offer of a high official position, choosing instead to come home and resume life as before. After she returns home and puts on her old clothes, she reveals herself to be a woman to her fellow soldiers, who are stunned that her secret had never come out in the entire decade of serving together.⁵

Disney’s cartoon retelling was released in 1998, starring Ming-Na Wen, Lea Salonga, Eddie Murphy, BD Wong, Donny Osmond, Soon-Tek Oh, Pat Morita, and James Hong.⁶ The film opens with the Huns, led by Shan-Yu, executing an attack on the Great Wall of China and declaring war on the emperor; elsewhere, a young woman named Mulan prepares for her matchmaking, which later turns out to be a complete disaster. When a decree calling one man from every family arrives in the village, Mulan does fear for her elderly father. She makes the decision to dress as a man, naming herself Ping, and takes her father’s place in the army. At first, she is ostracized and clearly does not fit in, but with time she earns acceptance and her place among them. Soon enough, they encounter the Huns and although they seemingly defeat them in a huge upset, Mulan is discovered to be a woman and the army abandons her. However, she finds that Shan-Yu and some of the Huns are still alive and are plotting to attack the Imperial City. With her quick wits, Mulan and the soldiers fight off and destroy Shan-Yu, saving the emperor. She is hailed by all as the savior of China and returns home a heroine, a relationship budding between her and Captain Li Shang.

A discussion on this film would be remiss without first noting that Disney is a gargantuan multibillion-dollar media company and no stranger

3 Feng Lan, “The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston’s Woman Warrior,” *Comparative Literature* 55, no. 3 (2003): 231; Jinhua Li, “Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009),” in *Heroism and Gender in War Films*, eds. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Kazecki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 187–205.

4 Li, “Mulan and Hua Mulan,” 188.

5 Ibid.

6 *Mulan*, DVD, directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook (1998; USA: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1998).

to homogenizing their products so that they reach an ever-increasing number of consumers. In her article on the reception of Disney's *Mulan*, scholar Jun Tang argues that "globalization of distribution has produced more homogeneous consumer needs, tastes, lifestyles, and preferences all over the world."⁷ In *Mulan*, Disney has aimed to rewrite the story based on elements typical of popular fairy tales. For example, a romantic element is inserted into the narrative at the very beginning of the film, as viewers are introduced to Mulan on the day of her matchmaking. Adding the whole matchmaking yarn serves to satiate the need for the love story element in common fairy tales. In doing so, the film loses much of the history of the original legend—that which makes it so uniquely Chinese.

Despite Disney's choice to westernize aspects of *Mulan*, its interpretation includes Mulan's choice to cross-dress—a distinct and key component to the story of Mulan. It is not a new concept; the history of gender portrayal in entertainment and literature across the globe is fraught with gender blending, and the history of cross-dressing in Chinese culture is surprisingly rich, given historical Asian attitudes towards women. Numerous pieces of literature—theatre, ballads, opera—have characters who feature incongruence in gender roles, especially women who disguise as men. In his book *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, historian and author Siu Leung Li posits, "The history of Chinese opera can...be instructively described as a series of narrative fragments of 'gender trouble'."⁸ According to Holly Devor in her review of Vern and Bonnie Bullough's article *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, men and women historically have engaged in cross-dressing for different reasons: males' motives were typically for sexual purposes, and they could do what they pleased without much worry for consequence, simply because they were protected by their gender and automatic status above women.⁹ On the other hand, females would cross-dress in order to experience taking their lives into their own hands, such as in the matters of economic freedom and independence. Often, the women who partook in cross-dressing came from lower classes, as these women had the least to lose and the most to gain by trying to live new lives as men, motivated by the desire to participate in the male-domineered realms of office, rank, and power.¹⁰ Ronald Altenburger writes that "female-

7 Jun Tang, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Production and Reception of Disney's *Mulan* Through Its Chinese Subtitles," *European Journal of English Studies* 12, no. 2 (2008): 149–50.

8 Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 1.

9 Holly Devor, "Cross-Dressing Then and Now," *The Journal of Sex Research* 30, no. 3 (1993): 289, www.jstor.org/stable/3812730.

10 Roland Altenburger, "Is It Clothes That Make the Man? Cross-Dressing, Gender, and Sex in Pre-Twentieth-Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," *Asian Folklore Studies* 64, no. 2 (2005): 170.

to-male dressing-up was perceived as dressing 'up', as an upgrading in social status, and hence as a willful transgression toward more power and freedom."¹¹ Men were already the center of the world, be it politically, socially, or anything in between, and a massive gap existed between men's and women's statuses. Cross-dressing in the imaginary worlds of myths, art, and writings provided a brief respite from this discrimination.

In Chinese theater, the earliest record of role switching was observed in the early years of the Tang Dynasty (617–908 CE), with men beginning to play female roles; women began to play male roles toward the middle of the Tang Dynasty.¹² The actress in a male role grew popular and has held a unique and strong presence in Chinese opera since Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), a period that scholars generally dub the "golden age" in Chinese theatrical history.¹³ Actresses in male roles were so popular they were often given the lead roles onstage. In fact, these actresses "were not only capable of performing male roles that required a good deal of singing, but they also portrayed military male figures, demonstrating their artistic mastery of martial arts and acrobatics."¹⁴ It would seem that because the practice was so widespread, it would be tolerated and normalized, but still from the ancient Chinese orthodox point of view, these cross-dressers were regarded as "human demons."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the practice continued through the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1911 CE, collectively) and cross-dressing remained a popular feature in both private troupes and public theatres.¹⁶

It is a slightly gauche gesture for Disney's adaptation to take this complex and significant facet of Chinese history and use it as a punchline. *Mulan* pits *Mulan's* femininity and masculinity against one another, but neither side truly wins. As a woman, she is clumsy, clueless, and lacking social graces and evidently unable to be a good daughter or bride; as a man, she is still incompetent and awkward, and her decision is scorned—the ancestors do not want to claim her, as one of them scathingly yells, "No! Your great-granddaughter had to be a CROSS-DRESSER!"¹⁷ Mushu also complains that he is doomed "all because Miss *Man* decided to take her little drag show on the road."¹⁸ Then her disguise falls apart anyway

11 Ibid., 170–1.

12 Chou Hui-Ling, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," *TDR* 41, no. 2 (1997): 133.

13 Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, 1.

14 Hui-Ling, "Striking Their Own Poses," 133.

15 Roland Altenburger, "Is It Clothes That Make The Man?," 170; Xue Keqiao and Angela Yiu, "Women Disguised as Men: Longing for the Past in Chinese Cinema," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 8 (1996): 33.

16 Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, 2.

17 *Mulan*, 1998.

18 Ibid.

against her will. Reverting back to woman was a shameful event for her, as she suddenly became a “treacherous snake,” having committed high treason and exemplifying the ultimate dishonor.¹⁹ Where an actress dressing as a man was historically regarded as a step up, in *Mulan* it is more like a fall down several flights. Even as she destroys Shan-Yu once and for all and saves China as a woman, her feminist significance is heavily watered down by the anticipated romance growing between her and Shang.²⁰

The cultural significance of cross-dressing is not the only piece that was lost in the film. There are no shortages of non-Chinese (but specifically Western) influences and references throughout *Mulan*, both major and very minor, from physical motions and gestures to dialogue and architecture. In fact, much of the film is not catered to Asian viewers at all. The humor is only funny to Western audiences: as General Li prepares to leave for the Tung Shao Pass after reviewing the military’s plan with his son, a dazed soldier salutes him before collapsing, yet saluting was not considered military etiquette in the time period. Mushu waking Mulan with a cricket alarm clock and yelling “All right, rise and shine, sleeping beauty!” is not funny to Chinese viewers as the phrases are not familiar. Toward the end of the film, Shan-Yu appears on the roof of the emperor’s palace next to gargoyles, yet gargoyles are Gothic-derived and have no place in the architecture of ancient China. Finally, Chinese culture is generally disapproving of physical contact and displays of affection between different genders, never mind between different social classes. In reality, for Mulan to throw her arms around the emperor would likely have carried consequences, and to embrace her companions would be very unrealistic.²¹

On the other hand, but in a similar manner, certain significant, distinctive Chinese historical facts and cultural traits were grossly exaggerated to build an obvious “Chinese” feel, creating an exotic appeal to non-Asian viewers. Disney shamelessly capitalized on these stereotypes, resulting in a somewhat skewed timeline and a warped sense of China. The Great Wall, a landmark unique to China, is front and center at the start of the film, but does not appear again in the remainder. Janet Maslin even remarks in a movie critique for *The New York Times* that “the China of *Mulan* has surprisingly little depth of field or background detail. The Great Wall and the Forbidden City are here, but so are a lot of empty spaces and scenes in which only one figure moves.”²² Although Shan-Yu

19 Ibid.

20 Li, “Mulan and Hua Mulan,” 196.

21 Jun Tang, “A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” 151.

22 Janet Maslin, “Film Review: A Warrior, She Takes on Huns and Stereotypes,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 1998, www.nytimes.com/1998/06/19/movies/film-review-a-warrior-she-takes-on-huns-and-stereotypes.html.

supposedly lived during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the film also highlights the Imperial City, which was not established until 1420 CE.²³ Tang continues to detail the featured cultural hyperboles: Mushu wakes up the ancestors with a gong; one ancestor brags about his descendants all being “acupuncturists” (probably the equivalent of a doctor); Mushu sits on a panda bear, cooks a dumpling on a fire, and is heard suggesting that he and other characters in that sequence “call out for egg rolls;” holding and waving fans is used as a display of femininity; the victory parade stars lion dancers and acrobatic dancers.²⁴ She writes,

Lion dancers as well as Chinese food and utensils seem to reflect the American concept of “Chinatown,” ... whereas acupuncturists, panda bears, the Great Wall, the Imperial City, Chinese calligraphy and Chinese martial arts are used in the Disney version of *Mulan* as elements conveying an Americanized index of “Chineseness.”²⁵

The stereotypes portrayed in *Mulan* construct a conveniently compressed China, ready for packaging and mass distribution to Disney’s consumers. The bent image of Chinese culture that is left promotes unjust stereotyping and places Chinese viewers in a strange position, where they are being depicted on a huge platform, but incorrectly. Though telling the story of *Mulan* may have had the intent of diversifying Disney’s films, it inadvertently excludes Chinese viewers even further by giving the Chinese characters Western traits.

Looking past the plethora of cultural inaccuracies and stereotypes, a close examination of the titular character also reveals that she is not quite the empowering Asian figure that many would hope. There is no mistake that *Mulan* is strong and powerful, more so than a clear majority of Disney’s female characters. Most female protagonists preceding *Mulan* have had very passive roles in their own fates, leaving it up to outside heroes. *Mulan* takes matters into her own hands and, when presented with a problem, does not hesitate, whether acting as a man or a woman. However, her whitewashing shows in the very traits that seem to make her so looked up to. Her “need to assert her individuality, her inability to be punctual, or even the humorous portrayal of her reading notes off her arm” paint her as another one of the typical “quirky” American girls who is self-proclaimed to be not like other girls, tipping into the realm of white feminism.²⁶ The white woman’s feminism is privileged and mostly self-

23 Jun Tang, “A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” 152.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 153.

26 Juhee, “*Mulan*: The White Feminist,” *Asian American Feminist* (blog), *Wordpress*, July 2, 2012, www.aafeminist.wordpress.com/2012/07/02/mulan-the-white-feminist/.

seeking; whiteness ensures privilege but being female puts one below males, so the white feminist only cares about white male/female equality. They let their issues take precedence over others, and Disney's *Mulan* falls to this phenomenon.

It would seem that for fear of being sexist *and* because it would be too brash—scholar and author Sam Abel writes that Disney “cannot critique traditional gender roles because [it] buy[s] into them”—Disney chose an already egalitarian story and pushed it to the extremes of Western feminism, losing the context of Chinese society in the process.²⁷ Although it is not *Mulan*'s intent to submit to white feminism, the subliminal underlying message in the film is that her Chinese culture and familial obligations are to be disregarded and discarded. *Mulan* becomes almost a caricature, far too wild to fit into her familial role and apparently beyond the hope of ever fulfilling it. Moreover, the film gives *Mulan* a second motivation, the much more individualistic, white feminist desire to discover who she is inside (heard in the musical number “Reflection”), in addition to fighting on her father's behalf. The former is emphasized so much in the film such that it begins to obscure the latter, only furthering her disregard for obedience and duty, turning her into an “Americanized hyper-individualistic heroine.”²⁸ Even though *Mulan* ended up coming home bearing gifts to honor her family, her purposes had become too far divided.

On top of the contrast of gender roles, it is simply unfaithful to the original narrative, which was not so much praised for the bravery of the heroine rather than it was for the values and morality that it represents—for being “the embodiment of loyalty and filial piety.”²⁹ After being abandoned by the army, *Mulan* laments, “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'd see someone worthwhile.”³⁰ To Western audiences, it might seem normal in the development of a young woman and that there is nothing wrong with wanting to focus on oneself. To Asian audiences, for whom family is often the most important building block of society, it is irreverent and perhaps one of the whitest and most disrespectful things one could say.

Mulan has been widely praised for finally presenting a strong female role model to young girls, especially in the Asian-American population. In many aspects, she is a perfectly solid role model, needing no Prince Charming and having the self-initiative to be the change she

27 Sam Abel, “The Rabbit in Drag: Camp and Gender Construction in the American Animated Cartoon,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 3 (1995): 188; Juhee, “*Mulan*: The White Feminist.”

28 Zhao Gengcheng, “American *Mulan*: Powerful and Powerless,” Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2010, https://www.uscet.org/sites/default/files/american_mulan_-_powerful_and_powerless_by_zhao_gengcheng.pdf.

29 Keqiao and Yiu, “Women Disguised as Men,” 33.

30 *Mulan*, 1998.

wants to see. However, Disney modifies Chinese history and capitalizes on stereotypes to appeal more to Western consumers. The implications reach far and wide, but Asian-American families, especially those who have gone through the immigration process, may be affected in a particular way. The twentieth century saw a huge influx of Asian immigrants, seeking new beginnings and better lives after fleeing war-torn homelands, having left everything behind. In 1965, the United States passed the Immigration and National Act, removing quotas based on nation of origin and sharp restrictions on immigration from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, bars that had been established since 1921.³¹ Following the passing of this act, migrations from Asia rose dramatically, propelled by events such as the gruesome regime of Mao Zedong, the bloody Vietnam War, and the North Korean Gulag, among an inexhaustive list of many others.³² Between 1980 and 1990, the population of Asian immigrants in the United States nearly doubled from 2,540,000 to 4,979,000, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.³³ By this time, many of the families that had immigrated following the Immigration and National Act had children and grandchildren of their own who would be consuming media from Disney.

Immigrant families invested themselves wherever they ended up, just knowing that the harder they worked, the better future they could provide for their children. These parents wanted their offspring to be able to take advantage of as many opportunities as possible in the New World, and so tried hard to integrate themselves into American society, but still wanted to preserve the culture and traditions of their old home.

This put the children and future generations in an interesting position: they should uphold and honor their family's and culture's traditions, yet they had not experienced it in the homeland like their parents or grandparents had. At the same time, they must work to be as fully assimilated into America as possible so that they could build the future that their parents came here for. New lifestyles clashed with traditions of culture and resulted in family friction; for instance, women generally had more freedom in America than in Asian countries, and parents and their daughters would disagree on what was acceptable for them to do. As if this were not enough, language divided the generations. Immigrant parents continued to speak their native languages; the children spoke English at

31 Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Asian Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, January 6, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/asian-immigrants-united-states>.

32 Milton Leitenberg, *Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century*, 3rd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

33 Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Asian Immigrants in the United States"; Campbell J. Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000," Working Paper no. 81, *U.S. Census Bureau*, February 2006.

school and with their friends, but at home spoke their native languages as well. The grandchildren of many immigrants could only speak English.

To the daughter of Asian immigrants, *Mulan* probably hits very close to home. Classic Chinese philosophy maintains the female as a submissive entity throughout her entire lifetime, keeping in line with her family and then that of her husband's.³⁴ Disney's *Mulan* does not fit in anywhere, cannot please her parents although she loves them and tries to, and is trying to discover herself. What *Mulan* will not do is encourage upholding familial traditions and obligations, but it will inspire young girls to break away from the expected to "find who they are inside." Since the values of Disney's *Mulan* lean toward white feminism, this is likely to work against what an Asian-American family wants. But a girl probably would not see anything off about *Mulan*—by ditching the role that she is supposed to play, she saves China, gets to hug the emperor, and comes home triumphant *and* with a potential suitor. Of course, the problem is that today most girls are not expected to see a matchmaker or bear sons to serve the emperor, as it was in the setting of *Mulan*; rather, the expectations could be to exhibit an appropriate amount of respect and politeness towards elders and authorities, to keep the peace and avoid confrontation, to aspire to certain professions, and to dress "properly." The list goes on. But with rapidly evolving societal norms, generations continue to find themselves at odds with each other over the "right" ways to behave. Given Disney's influence, there is no doubt that *Mulan* has shaped the childhoods and mindsets of millions of girls.

Mulan presents a stark contrast between the traditions and culture of *Mulan's* China and the imperialistic power of the West, making it clear that the only way to truly be an empowered heroine is to leave your traditions behind and live the Western way. However, it remains a powerful film, the first from Disney to star an Asian main character, and a heroine to boot. To some degree of success, it offers a glimpse into Asian culture, values, and its flaws, as well as tackles gender roles. As filled with inaccuracies and stereotypes as it is, and as much as it endorses Western ideals instead of the ideals of its intended setting, *Mulan* was still a monumental first step in Asian representation in mainstream media. For a hero's journey that is usually reserved for male protagonists, *Mulan* is a declaration of a fearless Asian heroine, one who has influenced a generation of young women and will continue to for years to come. Yet Disney falls too short in doing justice to the culture from which it drew this story. The sentiment and values put forth by the "Ballad of *Mulan*" were filtered in their film rendition with whitewashing and typecasts—truly consistent with Disney's own values in catering to American entertainment and the white American household. All

34 Carol C. Fan, "Language, Gender, and Chinese Culture," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 10, no. 1 (1996): 96.

the while the younger generation of Asian-American girls is left to watch *Mulan* and wonder who it is who can really embody who they are.