

FROM FILIAL PIETY TO FEMINIST ICON: RE-TELLING THE MULAN MYTH IN GLOBAL ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Ballad of Mulan encapsulates the themes of filial piety and devotion in a brief narrative and was first documented in the Northern Wei period (386–534 A.D.). Yet, the flexibility of this narrative is incredible. Originating as a nameless song, it eventually appeared in Ming novels and Qing operas, and more recently, in movies everywhere from this world. Such variations demonstrate the influence and durability of myths. Storytelling is a mode of cultural remembrance, but each version is a departure from the original. It is modified to fulfil the needs of the contemporary mindsets.

This paper will explore how Mulan has been adapted most recently and how the adaptations reflect gender, culture, and ideology as accessed through illustrative frameworks of Myth Retelling and Feminist Literary Criticism. In the preface to Ballad of Mulan, it shows the sacrifice as the liquid form of filial piety and collective duty and loyalty toward family and nation. Disney's animated version in 1998 shifts the story to one of self-discovery and personal growth, mirroring Western ideas of independence and individuality. This homage is carried over into the 2020 live-action remake that remixes Mulan's identity as well and adds martial identity, destiny, oppression, women empowerment, among other things feminist of anyone in this side of Chinese honorifics. Adaptations reveal the hybridisation of Eastern traditional narrative and Western film in transnational tales whose appeal is world-wide but still deep-rooted within its culture. Theoretically, from a feminist approach these adaptations can be understood as providing alternative reactions to patriarchy with the adaptations endorsing (or at times resisting or altering) patriarchy more radically. The Mulan myth speaks to the cross-section Myth: Feminism; Hybridity; Gender and Ideology. It foregrounds this interrelated constellation of topics in Chinese cultural history and global imaginative/meta-poetic traditions that the Mulan legend continues to stimulate.

Keywords: *Adaptation Studies, Myth Re-telling, Hybridization, Feminist Literary Criticism, Transnational Narratives*

INTRODUCTION

The ancient tale of Mulan has been interpreted a myriad of ways in cinema, opera, animated films in the range of minutes, and more recently, through live-action remakes, each time mutating her character in accordance with the changing values and belief systems of the time. In certain interpretations, Mulan has always been a traditional sign of filial piety and obedience, portrayed here as a duty-bound daughter who would place personal desires above obligations to the nation and family. In contrast, in other interpretations, Mulan symbolizes freedom and feminine power, going against gender norms and patrilineality. This juxtaposition in interpretation demonstrates how legend and myth are fluid entities that change so as to accommodate new audiences and environments, overtime.

This research looks at Mulan as a deeply cultural artifact that has transformed in many ways. Her story becomes a place in culture wherein power, gender, and duty are all renegotiated according to contemporary modes highlighting how new adaptations work as cultural negotiation. Mulan also represents how complex the discourses of power, gender and duty are. Her transformation from poetry to animation and live cinema also shows how every form and medium shifts the meaning of the narrative. Mulan is a continuous discourse between the past and present culture that is able to go beyond the stories in itself.

THEMATIC EXPLORATION

- **Adaptation as Cultural Negotiation**

Any form of adaptation is complex. As Hutcheon (2006) says, it is both “repetition without replication” and a process of change. Mulan, like other stories, crosses borders and enters a form of bargaining where cultural practices, business needs, and audience demands come together. Mulan's myth illustrates how adaptation can act as a cultural negotiation where both Eastern and Western elements come together to form a new hybrid. Ethically and culturally, which the Ballad of Mulan content is firmly rooted in, the poem is brief, composed of morals, and emphasizes Mulan's loyalty to her family and devotion to the emperor. While Mulan's cross-dressing is astounding, it is not considered a form of rebellion, but rather, a way of completing family obligations. Mulan's action in the end of the poem, where she declines the honors and goes back to domestic life, maintains the Confucian principles of social order harmony.

Disney's animated version of Mulan released in 1998 fully integrates Mulan's narrative and surrounding dynamics. Mulan detailed American story-telling dynamics such as three-act structure with a resource Western musical. The transition in character motivation pivots from defending a family's honor to one's self. During an internal struggle, the song Reflection illustrates Mulan as a self-liberated woman. Despite the movie's success with western audiences, the version of Mulan portrayed drew criticism in China because of the lack of her conservative ideas as well as marriage and traditional family structure, showcasing the issues with cultural. In the 2020 Version of Mulan the dealt with the issue and attempts to reply to the critique of the cultural inauthenticity of animated Mulan by taking out Mushu to musical, the Movie attempts to remake the Mulan and adds the gravity of resurrection of wuxia cinema. The movie focuses on the Western ideas of qi and other cinematically pleasing landscapes with Western ideas and concepts. Yet the cultural, ideas, centered along the protective gaze of a global Disney-field of western ideals block of cinema. The block portrays the supposedly empowered Xian Lang with the CGI of a western 'witch', full of battle and the 'chosen one' philosophy. The partial complex western feminism with a layer of transnational interlaces. The movie comes with an ambivalent hybrid fully Disney skyscraper wrapped with aired epic realism.

In these different versions, adaptation appears as the process of shifting the weighting of different values. Mulan's ballad gives pride of place to duty and collectivity, the 1998 movie offers the opposite extreme of self-importance and self-development, while the 2020 attempt awkwardly tries to give authentic self-expression and global marketability equal sponson. Mulan's myth, then, illustrates adaptation as the cultural negotiation of the hybrid, which creates new meanings while preserving the sources.

- **Feminist Re-telling of Myth**

Feminist criticism has for a long time regarded myth retelling as a form of political action — to revise taken-for-granted stories to place women at the center of the narrative and challenge the silences of a patriarchal discourse (Ostriker, 1982). In this light, *Mulan's* adaptations operate as feminist re-visions, negotiating gender, power, and identity in distinctive ways.

The *Ballad of Mulan*, although lacking feminist intentions, does contain proto-feminist potential. The ability to successfully impersonate a male soldier for twelve years demonstrates the performativity of gender roles. *Mulan's* male comrades lose their sense of self as women and until she reveals herself, they do not recognize her. This points to the conclusion that gender distinctions are a social construct. Though the poem restores her to the home, she is able to enter and perform in the masculine space and excel in it, which does not only challenge patriarchal norms, but sets the stage for future feminist reinterpretations.

Disney's 1998 animation *Mulan* propels the story to the next level by including feminist aspects within the story. Her conflict is personal as well as filial, as she cannot do the expected womanly duties. The film portrays her journey as an act of feminism. *Mulan* saves China and is recognized for her achievements because of her self-determination and hard work. She is the only one who saves the day, and the secondary romance with Shang only adds to her strength, marking a change from patriarchal to female dominance. The third wave of feminism is insulted by Disney's corporate monopoly of the phrase "girl power".

The 2020 statue replication misses the point because it strengthens the female leaders through stereotypical notions ones of which are; kung fu is dressed in masculine armor. *Mulan* only gains affirmation from the empire while Xian Lang, the female who embodies limitless female power, is punished. Feminist representation is doubled bladed, women who break the rules are celebrated as long as the end result is in accordance with the patriarchal system.

The story ballads also depict *Mulan's* change from a respectful daughter to a complex feminist figure. The 1998 animation relocated independence. The 2020 remake reconciles cultural authenticity with global empowerment. *Mulan's* myths are juxtaposed with feminist meanings which surround the story. These meanings are rewritten to reflect the enduring historical, ideological, and contextual changes.

- **Transitional Myth Narrative**

The core theme of myths is the ability to change narrative form during a time span and cross different mediums. Hutcheon (2006) and Sanders (2006) argue that an adaptation is a form of re-creation and not simple duplication of the original work. *Mulan's* myth demonstrates this through its narrative transitions; from a light lyric to a comedic musical to a grand realist epic.

The *Ballad of Mulan* is a primer and episodic narrative showcasing the oral tradition. Un-embellished, stream lined, with no emotional interconnectedness: *Mulan* put on a uniform, fought, received and then declined awards, and eventually came home. It serves the purpose of cultural moral. The gaps and silences: how she felt, what challenges she endured are narrative expansions which come to light during later reinterpretations.

The 1998 adaptation of the Disney animated movie *Mulan* built on the original poem, turning it into a three-act musical comedy. The internal conflict *Mulan* faced, along with the psychological aspects of it, were the focus of the song *Reflection*. The family friendly story still retained, with comic relief characters like Mushu and Cri-Kee along with several musical numbers. As with the rest of the Disney animation films, a romantic interest was added, furthering the story's alignment with western narrative structures. The added romance was explained through a series of text messages describing the character's relationship, used as a frame narrative.

The 2020 live action adaptation ditched the romance and comedy, instead focusing on the themes of fate and martial prowess. The tone of the narrative was elevated with dramatic elements, becoming solemn and filled with grandeur and spectacle. Still holding the character's interest, the witch figure character provided an alternative path of female power, parallel to *Mulan*.

Mulan portrayed as a legend emphasizes how the story of *Mulan* has always been reconstituted in order to fit into different linguistic, cultural and ideological structures. She fills the grandeur of epic verse in the original ballad, while subsequent adaptations — musical comedies and animated treatments — cast her to fit contemporary taste. As each re-engineering testifies: Myth is not just about change, it's all about change; that's how it has managed to keep its vitality throughout the ages and over so many religious terrains.

CONCLUSION

Mulan's experiences are a fascinating case of culture adaptation. Since the Ballad of *Mulan* focused on obligations of family and duty to the community, then on to Disney's 1998 animated film that focused on the ideals of liberal feminism, and then to the 2020 live-action film that combines the new and the old, *Mulan*'s tale embodies the endless adaptations of a cultural myth. Every version illustrates the mutable nature of cultural memory and the prevailing ideological structures while retaining the core essence of the story.

Viewed in the light of adaptation studies, *Mulan*'s transnational circulation is illustrative of "cultural negotiation", a form of hybridity that does not efface the source, but produces new meanings. What feminist criticism brings about is the revelation of different dimensions are reflected in *Mulan*: her roles as a filial daughter and as a female figure fighting for womanist power among other issues related to social order, power, and representation through gender. More than one narrative theory tries to explain how different forms of a single narrative—poetry, animation, and film—can be used to reconstruct a myth by changing its mood, tone, and even structure, giving voice to what was once silent and transforming the old into something new. In adaptation studies, *Mulan*'s shifts should be seen as constructive, as the different evolving cultural meanings she embodies signify productive change. Her story is at the crossroads of the East and the West, modernity and tradition, feminism and patriarchy, individuality and social obligation. The change *Mulan* undergoes, from a compliant daughter to a warrior, is an example of the change storytelling can convey. *Mulan* is a symbol of global hybridity—timeless, versatile, and indicative of dual cultural and imaginative social facets of the world.

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