‘A Girl Worth Fighting For’: Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan

by

Hilary Sotomayor

A Thesis

presented to

The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

'A GIRL WORTH FIGHTING FOR': TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE WOMAN WARRIOR HUA MULAN

Hilary Sotomayor

University of Guelph, 2021

Advisors:

Dr. Norman Smith

(Department of History)

Dr. Christina Han

(Department of History)

External Examiner:

Dr. Blaine Chiasson

(Department of History)

This study analyses the shifts in time in the characterization and legacy of the woman warrior Hua Mulan through critical historical and cultural analysis of adaptations of Mulan from the original ballad published as early as the fourth century, to the most recent live action films released in 2020. Shifts in gender expression and crossdressing as a result of societal shifts are discussed alongside these cultural shifts. The research is divided into four sections to map Mulan's development: pre-Qing, Qing, Mainland Republican-era adaptations and People's Republic-era adaptations. A considerable historiography is consulted alongside available critical acclaim to further analyse the legacy of Mulan. These comparisons reveal that Mulan represents shifting Chinese values as a role model and ideal citizen, leading to her use by authors and filmmakers for various agendas and to continued personal and national identification as a national hero with the rise of mass media in China.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people that I would like to thank for making this thesis happen. First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to my partner Bill Tattrie. Your patience and support from start to finish was one of the most valuable resources I had working through long nights, and I will appreciate your willingness to travel to Guelph to keep me company and allow me more time to work on this thesis for the rest of our lives. I would also like to thank my uncle Joel Sotomayor for giving me a peaceful place to work, and the laptop that I wrote it with. Thank you for always supporting my dreams and education. I would also like to thank my family, especially my mother, Noellie Sotomayor, for always being my personal cheerleader in everything that I do.

Many thanks must go to my supervisor, Dr. Norman Smith, for his excellent support, patience, and guidance, from when we first met in my last year as an undergraduate at the University of Guelph, to keeping me on track to finish a project so monumental. You have helped me develop in many ways over the course of writing this thesis, and I will be forever grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Christina Han for her valuable input and advice. The end product would have been much different without her keen insight.

I would also like to thank Dr. Owen Giddens for helping me through the toughest parts of this pandemic and the writing process, and keeping me confident in myself. Thank you for always being proud of me. Finally, I would like to thank the Chatime on Harvard Street in Guelph for keeping my spirits up with their weekly deliveries of tea.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my neighbourhood friend Flop, who graced me with his presence nearly every day during this Master's program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Acknowledgments iii
Dedication iv
Table of Contents v
Introduction 2
Aims and Methodology 5
Chapter 1: Gender and Crossdressing in Historical China: An Analysis 11
Men and Women in Confucian Gender Theory 15
Men: The *Wen* and *Wu* Paradigm 16
Women: *Funü, Nüxing, Nüren* and Perceptions of Women in Confucian Gender Theory 20
Crossdressing as Practice in Regular Life and in Theatre 23
Crossdressing in Real Life 26
Crossdressing in Chinese Theatre 27
Examples of Crossdressing in Theatre: *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* [*The butterfly lovers*] 30
Li Yu's *Lian xiang bang* [*Women in love*] 35
Male Crossdressing in Theatre: *Nan wanghou* [*The male queen*] 36
Chapter 2: Female Knight-Errants: The Appeal of Woman Warriors in Chinese Literature 41
Famous Examples of Female Knight-Errants in Chinese History 46
Shi Jianqiao: A Twentieth Century Female Avenger 47
Chapter 3: Pre-Qing Dynasty Adaptations of Mulan: The Original Ballad and Beyond **51**
The Ballad of Mulan 52
Mulan in the Tang Dynasty: Celebrations of Filial Piety 58
Du Mu's Mulan Temple 59
Mulan in the Ming Dynasty: Femininity and Light-Hearted Comedy in *Ci Mulan* [*The heroine Mulan goes to war in her father's place*] 60
Chapter 4: Mulan in the Qing Dynasty: Anti-Government Discourse, Purity and Suicide Tropes **64**
Qing Dynasty Novels: *Mulan qinü zhuan* [*Biography of the extraordinary woman Mulan*] 65
Sui Tang yang [*Historical romances of the Sui and Tang*] 68
Chapter 5: Mainland Republican-era Mulan: The Modernization of Women and China **69**
Film History in China 70
Mulan in the Mainland Republican Era 74
Mulan congjun [*Mulan joins the army*] (1903) 77
Ouyang Yuqian's *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) 79
Chapter 6: People's Republic-era Adaptations: The Patriotic Mulan and Beyond **83**

Yueh Feng's *Hua Mulan* [*Lady general Hua Mu-Lan*] (1964) 85
The Woman Warrior: Questions of Historical and Cultural Authenticity 87
Disney Adaptations and Beyond: Debates of Cultural Appropriation and Chinese Cultural Identity 92
Disney: Historical and Cultural Heritage, Presentism and Commercialism 94
History, Public Memory, and Heritage 95
Disney Parks: Idealized Depictions of American Society 102
Disney's Mountie: Rewriting of Historical Imagery 105
Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) 106
Song of the South: The Writing of an Unproblematic Historical Past 108
Disney's *Mulan* (1998): International Acclaim and Chinese Academic Vitriol 109
Analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) 111
Chinese and Western Historiography Surrounding Disney's *Mulan* (1998) 115
Children's Picture Books and Films: Alternative Entries in the Chinese-American Diaspora 121
Non-Disney Films and Mulan: *Hua Mulan* (1998) and *The Secret of Mulan* (1998) 124
Hua Mulan (2009): A Chinese Response to Disney's *Mulan* 126
Analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (2020) 129
Mulan in 2020: Continued Debates of Cultural Authenticity and Controversy 132
Matchless Mulan (2020): Competing in the Box Offices of Mainland China 135
Concluding Thoughts **138**
Bibliography **144**

- *The Ballad of Mulan* (Anonymous).

"Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,
Mulan weaves, facing the door.
You don't hear the shuttle's sound,
You only hear Daughter's sighs.
They ask Daughter who's in her heart,
They ask Daughter who's on her mind.
'No one is on Daughter's heart,
No one is on Daughter's mind.
Last night I saw the draft posters,
The Khan is calling many troops,
The army list is in twelve scrolls,
On every scroll there's Father's name.
Father has no grown up son,
Mulan has no elder brother.
I want to buy a saddle and horse,
And serve in the army in Father's place.'

In the East Market she buys a spirited horse,
In the West Market she buys a saddle,
In the South Market she buys a bridle,
In the North Market she buys a long whip.
At dawn she takes leave of Father and Mother,
In the evening camps on the Yellow River's bank.
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,
She only hears the Yellow River's flowing water cry tsien tisen.

At dawn she takes leave of the Yellow River,
In the evening she arrives at Black Mountain.
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,
She only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu.
She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war,
She crosses passes and mountains like flying.
Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots,
Chilly light shines on iron armor.
Generals die in a hundred battles,
Stout soldiers return after ten years.

On her return she sees the Son of Heaven,
The Son of Heaven sits in the Splendid Hall.
He gives out promotions in twelve ranks
And prizes of a hundred thousand or more.

The Khan asks her what she desires.
'Mulan has no use for a minister's post.
I wish to ride a swift mount
To take me back to my home.'

When Father and Mother hear Daughter is coming
They go outside the wall to meet her, leaning on each other.
When Elder Sister hears Younger Sister is coming
She fixes her rough, facing the door.
When Little Brother hears Elder Sister is coming
He whets the knife, quick quick, for pig and sheep.
'I open the door to my east chamber,
I sit on my couch in the west room,
I take off my wartime gown
And put on my old-time clothes.'
Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder
She goes out the door and sees her comrades.
Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed.
Traveling together for twelve years
They didn't know Mulan was a girl.
'The he-hare's feet go hop and skip,
The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled.
Two hares running side by side close to the ground,
How can they tell if I am he or she?'"[1]

Introduction

Hua Mulan, the Chinese female warrior made famous worldwide in Disney's *Mulan* in 1998, has had a long celebrated cultural, historical and political significance within Chinese societies. The classic tale describes the story of a young woman who saves her ill and aging father from serving in a war by taking his place in the army. She conceals her identity for twelve years without being detected and achieves great status and victories in the military. Most adaptations of the story of Mulan end the tale with Mulan rejecting all offers of the valour, high status and riches that the Khan offers her, and she requests only to be able to return home to her

[1] Anonymous, "The Ballad of Mulan," in *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Han H. Frankel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976): 68-72.

family. Reaching home, she discards her military garb and returns to her regular life as a filial and loyal daughter. It is through these examples of virtue and loyalty that Mulan demonstrates virtue that was considered worth emulating in Chinese culture, as seen through her continuing presence in Chinese culture.

Since its earliest potential publication in the fourth century A.D., the story of Mulan has had a great amount of time to be preserved, revived, readapted and incorporated into various cultural, historical and political contexts. Because of the high esteem that the Chinese have held for Hua Mulan and her valorous deeds, it is natural that the story of Hua Mulan has had innumerable accounts of her actions and virtue over the last millennium. Each adaptation was created for its own purpose, be it entertainment or propaganda, and each adaptation carries its own contingent historical, cultural and political contexts. Sharing the common plot line as described in the *Ballad of Mulan*, each version of Mulan uses her story and her character to send their own messages about virtuous characteristics that the Chinese ought to emulate, opinions on the state, and thinly veiled discussions of gender norms in Chinese society, in both historic and modern China.

Given the extensive amount of time that Mulan has existed in Chinese culture, it is inevitable that historiography and debates about the origins of *Mulan* appear many times in both scholarship and popular discussions. Many different opinions on when the original poem dates to range from the fourth century, to the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), to the Sui (581-618).[2] Because of this ambiguity, questions of whether or not Mulan actually existed, what ethnicity she actually was, or if the legend was written about similar events or completely fabricated are

[2] Chuanmao Tian and Caixia Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," *Continuum* 27, no. 6 (2013): 865; Louise Edwards, "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," *Nan Nü* 12 (2010): 177; Fu Hao, "Biographical Sketches," *Chinese Studies in History* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2001-2002): 30; Anna Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 16, no. 1 (2014): 114.

present within contemporary scholarship.[3] However, these details are not important to Mulan's story, for the meanings she carries for the Chinese are far greater than the scope of these debates. That children today are religiously taught the ballad in primary school textbooks attests to the very little importance attached to the historically vague nature of *Mulan*.[4]

Since her creation in approximately the fourth to sixth centuries A.D., Mulan has acted as a beacon, as an ideal person, and is commonly perceived as the most influential woman warrior in Chinese history.[5] She has been emphasized for her filial piety, state loyalty, valour, bravery, intellect, military prowess and virtue in most adaptations of her story; all qualities that writers and readers feel embody the ideal virtues in Chinese society.[6] Although not initially written to portray Confucian values, much of what is treasured about Mulan in later versions of her story are her chastity, filial piety and loyalty to the state, often via her "female duties" and temporary male ones.[7] Naturally, subsequent versions attach their own meanings to the tale of *Mulan* in their historical, cultural and political contexts, with versions often depending on the last known version of *Mulan* for further additions in China's "heroic tradition".[8]

---

[3] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 865; Feng Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," *Comparative Literature* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 232; Hao, "Biographical Sketches," 30; Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, ed. Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010): xii.

[4] Xi Chen, "Representing Cultures Through Language and Image: A Multimodal Approach to Translations of the Chinese Classic Mulan," *Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (2018): 215.

[5] Hao, "Biographical Sketches," 30-31; Renjie Zhang, "Ode to Mulan: Seeing the Animated Film Mulan," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 32; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," in *Heroism and Gender in War Films*, ed. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Razecki (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014): 187, 189; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xii.

[6] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 229, 232; Hao, "Biographical Sketches," 31; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177; Max L. Bohnenkamp, "An Anonymous Work from the Book of the Manor House of Lord Che," trans. Max L. Bohnenkamp and Na Xin in *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 326; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, vii.

[7] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," 114-115; Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 232-233; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 189.

[8] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 229; Joseph R. Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," *positions* 4, no. 2 (1996): 346; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 175-177; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 189; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, vii, xii.

Building on the filial piety and virtue present in the original ballad, subsequent versions have added characteristics such as the four womanly virtues of Confucianism (chastity and fidelity, womanly words, womanly bearing and womanly works) wherein one ought to behave modestly, speak softly, dress up prettily and do their women's work diligently to please and honour their husband and family, as seen through various references to Mulan's work on the loom.[9] The addition of chastity to Mulan's story came in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), when the issue of remaining chaste amongst the immoral dangers to women in war were brought forth.[10] While Mulan's diligence in remaining chaste was made clear in subsequent plays through the reassurance to her mother (and the audience by extension) that she understands the danger she is in and will safeguard it with her life, her chastity is mainly safeguarded by the very tool that enables her to traverse this boundary: crossdressing.

Aims and Methodology

Comparing and contrasting versions of Mulan's stories answers the question of what sort of woman she was, and demonstrate the reasons why Mulan has continued to retain her relevance. There are not many other examples of stories that have survived the test of time while maintaining at least some semblance of its original meaning and sentiment, despite the many inevitable distortions that come with the many adaptations of a single story. With the ability of each author to mold and shape Mulan into the woman and citizen that they need her to be without losing her original sentiment and appeal, her cultural presence is maintained through artistic expression and embedded socio-political discourse.

[9] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," 115, 118.
[10] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 233; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 180.

In addition to her direct use as a moral exemplar and political tool, *Mulan* facilitates discussion of gender norms through the use of crossdressing as a trope that is common through all adaptations. This paper will illustrate how the juxtapositioning of Mulan as a filial daughter and a loyal soldier demonstrates masculinity and femininity in Chinese opera and theatre by discussing her interactions with gender and crossdressing. Gender as it is conceived within Confucian frameworks and crossdressing as a trope and practice will be discussed broadly, as they facilitate comparisons of the Confucian conceptions of male and female, and provide the framework in which Mulan's crossdressing can be considered. Through a chronological structure, this paper tracks the differences in how crossdressing is depicted over time to answer an additional question: why does Mulan continue to crossdress in modern adaptations, despite women gradually becoming part of the public sphere from the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921)? Analysing the use of crossdressing in *Mulan* and other popular Chinese operas and plays establishes whether crossdressing as a theatrical trope merely remains as a traditional part of a play that does not necessarily need to be removed or updated, or if the continued perseverance of this trope continues to be an important part of *Mulan*.

Before discussing *Mulan* adaptations, it is important to outline the conception of gender norms in Confucian society, in terms of how these norms dictate the expected actions of men and women in Chinese society, even if they do not necessarily line up with reality along class lines. An understandably idealized and simplified portrayal of men and women is produced as a result, and is generally the kind that is seen in Chinese writings, operas and films. Establishing these paradigms of the separate public and private spheres of men and women respectively helps to explain the historic culture that persists in versions of *Mulan*, as well as providing a parallel avenue of analysis that brings insight into China's social developments as it approaches

nationhood in the twentieth century. Mulan is an interesting and useful case study for tracking this development in how easily these experiences of men and women are juxtaposed in the texts for many purposes, including comedic effect, hypothetical musings and societal commentary.

By establishing a framework of the Confucian conceptions of gender and their respective roles in society, this paper will discuss crossdressing as it appears in Chinese entertainment as a whole, and in adaptations of *Mulan*. As the trope that enables Mulan's brave foray into the male sphere in lieu of her father, it is equally as important to delve into its conception as a cultural tradition and as a theatrical trope, as there is a rich history that accompanies both. Building on this tradition will facilitate a discussion about the female knight-errant genre, which closely resembles the tradition of Mulan's foray into the public sphere in defense of her father. Knight-errants have a similar personal sense of justice that propels them to take matters into their own hands, as well as a similar characteristic of notable martial skills that enable them to act independently. While Mulan typically goes in defense of her father, and in later adaptations for the state, and is thus not outside of the law as knight-errants typically are, discussing female knight-errantry as a similar genre that resurfaces in popularity in the early twentieth century partially explains the persistence of the crossdressing tradition in adaptations of *Mulan*, and the appeal of virtuous martial heroines that defend the weak and generally remain loyal to their patriarchs.

In order to create a succinct summary of the ways that Mulan has been conscripted for certain needs, a wide selection of mediums have been selected. This selection includes the original poem, various plays from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), and the early twentieth century, and movies from the early twentieth century onwards, concluding with a discussion of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan* (2020). This discussion

includes a comparative analysis to movies likely made in response to Disney's films, including *Hua Mulan* (2009) and *Matchless Mulan* (2020) (*Wushuang Hua Mulan*), as well as picture books published inside and outside of the Chinese-American diaspora. The abundance of depictions allows for a deeper discussion of the interacting and intersecting socio-political agendas embedded within these works that is not available for pre-twentieth century adaptations, as there are only the extant copies. Thus, one is limited to what can be surmised from the cultural and historical references that are featured within the works to draw upon for comparison and analysis of relevant themes and tropes. Each adaptation is discussed within its historical and socio-political contexts, as well as the context surrounding its medium when applicable, as the transition between stage opera and film, for example, lends itself to discussions of China's general trajectory and development into a modern nation. These discussions will also include analysis of each adaptation's depictions of men and women as demonstrated by Mulan and by other characters, as they provide insight into China's cultural and social development, as well as the development of the depiction of the ideal daughter and citizen.

Analysis of the varying adaptations will be divided into four sections, grouping them chronologically as well as by their similar cultural traits and narratives, and will be compared and contrasted as different tropes, additions, and omissions are considered. The original ballad will form a single section alongside Tang (618-906) and Ming Dynasty depictions as the pre-Qing era, as these depictions more or less stay in line with the general narrative of the original *Ballad of Mulan*, with some minor additions that stem from the cultural and political contexts of each author. Tang Dynasty depictions add the old and infirm trope that is usually retained in most other adaptations up to present day, and the Ming Dynasty introduces the use of specifically

named enemy groups that threaten the nation, as well as the marriage trope that appears in quite a few adaptations post-Ming Dynasty.

Qing era depictions follow in their own category, using previously common tropes, but including their own dramatic departures from the overall narrative that emphasizes more of an anti-governmental attitude, which differs from the vague statements on government of previous adaptations and the emphasis on bemused comedy and wonderment centered around Mulan's crossdressing. These dramatic versions of *Mulan* even go so far as to use the trope of suicide to emphasize Mulan's virtue as well as subtly rejecting perceived corruption in Qing Dynasty governments -- a unique trope that is not used after the end of the Qing, in favour of happier endings and more uplifting themes.

Mainland Republican era (1911-1949) adaptations of *Mulan* as a category of analysis take another unprecedented turn as Mulan is used to emphasize nationalism and patriotism that peaks in wartime China (1937-1945) – an unusual turn in sentiment given the previous anti-government stance that previous depictions that allow for the conscription of aging men, as a method of critiquing unreasonable government demands. While these versions of *Mulan* still feature the filial piety that Mulan is renowned for, a noticeable shift in patriarchal loyalty is directed towards the state, as *Mulan* becomes a venue for shaming men into action, and inspiring women with emancipatory attitudes by emphasizing the importance of defending the nation. These versions of *Mulan* will be considered amidst the backdrop of perceived Chinese national weakness as China begins to address the idea of nationhood, and the imperative of unity in the face of Japanese invasion and aggression that began in 1931, with the Manchurian Incident (1931-1932). The shift from primarily written texts and on-stage plays will also be discussed, as

film is quickly used in this period as a method of mass education and inoculation of state values through easily accessible entertainment.

The final section of this thesis will consider era of the People's Republic (1949-present) adaptations of *Mulan*, beginning with communist adaptations in the mid-twentieth century. Communist versions continue the previous patriotic rhetoric in opera and film, as the brave and virtuous Mulan continues to be portrayed as the ideal patriot, with increasing emphasis on prioritizing duty to the nation. Other interesting entities in the *Mulan* legacy appear in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, which include Maxine Hong Kingston's (b. 1940) *The Woman Warrior*, and Disney's renditions of *Mulan* in 1998 and 2020.

The feminism and differing approaches towards Chinese history and culture present in the Kingston and Disney versions are enough for some critics to disregard them in the evolution of Mulan as a folk tale and treasured cultural icon. By comparing and contrasting these adaptations with preceding ones, the question of appropriation and ownership over the character and legacy of Mulan will be addressed as part of the rhetoric that is unique to this period. Given Mulan's probable heritage as a Xianbei warrior and mythical status overall, questions of appropriation and historical and cultural accuracy invite discussions of public history and the creation of cultural heritage based on a collective myth, which will be discussed through an overview of Disney and its unique takes on culture and history as an American entertainment giant and business. A considerable historiography will be consulted alongside the analysis, including the critical acclaim and harsh criticism received from reviewers of these films – a rare resource that cannot be consulted for much of the older known versions of *Mulan*. These adaptations will also be discussed in terms of their attitudes towards crossdressing and their

portrayals of Confucian gender ideals, as the rhetoric is shaped by filmmaker's contemporary perceptions of these concepts, as they have in previous adaptations, but are unique in the introduction of individualist and feminist themes by Kingston and Disney, and the willful continuation of portrayals of Mulan as a collectivist and traditional Chinese woman warrior in Chinese adaptations.

Chapter 1: Gender and Crossdressing in Historical China: An Analysis

Crossdressing in *Mulan* is, at its most simple conception, a staple narrative tool that appears within adaptations as the central method of conflict resolution; Mulan's father, who is generally unfit for military service due to being older or ill, is conscripted into the Khan's army. Because she has no suitable male siblings or relatives to serve in the army in her father's place, she elects to enter military service by impersonating a soldier. While this is primarily heralded in most adaptations as the pinnacle of filial virtue, the use of crossdressing to enable her to enter the male sphere is often morally ambiguous at best, and transgressive within acceptable limits at worst. The crossdressing is accepted under circumstances of crisis and the condition that Mulan returns to her normal life as a woman.

Mulan's foray into the male world is enabled by exceptional circumstances, as the bulk of the original ballad's contents describe her entry into the male world, and her return to the female world. Stemming from Confucian structures of gender and societal norms, her co-opting of a male persona through crossdressing is demonstrated in adaptations through her adoption of male dress and gesture as an idealized example of a *wu* male, a type of male that is primarily distinguished by their martial talents, and ability to know when to properly use force. Confucian gender and family values are thus responsible for the need for Mulan's foray into the public

sphere to be temporary, as Chinese society as portrayed in historical media enforces a patriarchal structure that forbids women from participating in roles outside of the household.

Crossdressing, in the context of art, much like the act of impersonation within the original ballad and its later iterations, is accepted in entertainment as these personas can be put on and removed at will. Confucian gender norms otherwise make clear distinctions of normative actions and qualities of men and women socially, and anyone transgressing set roles may be viewed as suspect. Given this, the distinction between maleness and femaleness can be tracked and analysed through adaptations of the *Mulan* folk tale, as additions and alterations to how she and other characters are portrayed project the cultural standards for ideal (and sometimes not ideal) men and women at the time they are written. The relationship between these adaptations and their social and political contexts is a reciprocal one; adaptations of *Mulan* are often written with projecting the ideal daughter and citizen in *Mulan*, and the political contexts of the time shape the way that she is portrayed.

Issues of Mulan using crossdressing in order to cross gender boundaries are often discussed within later versions of *Mulan* and by those who have written about her. Although one might assume that the dichotomy of male and female roles in historic Chinese society would make crossdressing, especially in order to enter a woman into the "man's world", highly suspect, crossdressing was viewed as amusing or as a seemingly simple plot device.[1] The original ballad, for example, makes no mention of Mulan's crossdressing until the end of the poem, where she reveals herself to be a woman to her comrades after twelve years of concealing it. Mulan's crossdressing was accepted by audiences because of the urgency of the situation, and as a

[10] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," 112; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177.

solution that aids in her fulfilling her filial piety and loyalty to the state.[2] Additionally, what solves the issue of Mulan gaining power in the "man's world" is fixed through her return to the domestic sphere.[3] Given the ballad's lack of attention to Mulan's crossdressing, it is not surprising that patriarchal themes still exist within the story of *Mulan*, despite the more egalitarian interpretations that came into play in the early twentieth century, especially with the feminism present in creation of Disney's *Mulan* in 1998.

While women are no longer required to impersonate men to enter the public sphere, and generally live outside the domestic sphere without scorn or suspicion, the tale of Mulan risking life and limb to keep her father out of military service is quite an appealing one, even to this day. Whether she is portrayed as a dutiful daughter, a dedicated defender of the state, or a powerful female hero, audiences have enjoyed her exploits from her inception. The versatility of the story of *Mulan* is in part what continued its active participation in Chinese culture.[4] Without it, there would be nothing that modern audiences would find relatable in her story, as strict gender norms are slowly and intentionally being dismantled within many societies today.

Crossdressed heroes and heroines have been the subject of many studies, likely for their tantalizing and intriguing gender play, which is unsurprising given their enjoyable nature for intended audiences. Most studies cite Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity when discussing crossdressing and the actors within these plays, noting that gender as a regulating function as expressed through dress and gesture explains the avid use of crossdressing in Chinese

[2] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 347; Roland Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Makes the Man? Cross-Dressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," *Asian Folklore Studies* 64, no. 2 (2005): 170, 181.
[3] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," 116; Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 347; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Makes the Man? Cross-Dressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 180.
[4] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xii; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 176.

opera and theatre plots.[5] The temporary foray from one segregated side of society to the other for plot-related reasons negates the transgressive nature of most crossdressing in Chinese literature, much less Mulan's selfless act of sacrifice in her crossdressing, and many scholars choose to focus on the sociopolitical context that made such characters compelling, though Anna Wing Bo Tso suggests that the original *Ballad of Mulan* is the first text that challenges Confucian patriarchal oppression of Chinese women.[6] Though the crossdressing in these plays and operas is not necessarily subversive, Roland Altenburger argues that these crossdressers, as part of a fantasy for the audience, are traversing a forbidden zone that highlights the oppressed nature of women in Confucian society, which is especially evident in *tanci*, narrative forms of song that alternate between verses and prose, written by women.[7] *Tanci* originated as a popular literary genre in the Ming Dynasty, though it became popular amongst elite women in the mid-Qing Dynasty as both the authors and the target audience. *Tanci* was thus used as part of an exploration of gendered experiences and a separate literary tradition, with crossdressing being used as a method of provocative exploration of these themes.[8] Crossdressing in theatre continued its popularity well into the twentieth century, until it was demonized during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), likely due to its perceived bourgeois roots, though it remained popular in the 1950s and 1960s in Hong Kong.[9]

---

[5] Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 146; Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 113.

[6] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177; Wing Bo Tso, "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions," 122; Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 346; Jie Guo, "Mulan Comes Home From the War: The Meaning of Homecoming in Late Imperial Chinese Literature," in *Odyssean Identities in Modern Cultures: The Journey Home*, eds., H. Gardner and S. Murnaghan (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014): 21; Cuncun Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan* eds., K. Louie and M. Low (London: Routledge, 2003): 31; Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 5, no. 4 (2011): 567, 572.

[7] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore,", 171.

[8] Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 53-54; Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," 567.

[9] Chengzhou He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," *differences* 24, no. 2 (January 1 2013): 158, 160.

On the other hand, Chengzhou He rightly acknowledges the need to separate understandings of Chinese crossdressing from theories of gender performativity and queer studies from the 1990s, and the reconsideration of the prevalence of viewing gender as either an essence or a performed role.[10] It is tempting to think of gender as either an essence or a performed role, but he suggests that the "essence" of a gender is being performed in these situations to suggest that theatre directly reshapes human values and social morals, but it is more plausible to argue that the existence of crossdressing as a popular trope over several dynasties alone affirms social mores instead of flaunting them.[11] Nevertheless, Mulan's relatability to audiences as a filial daughter and virtuous woman, and the flexibility of plot, accounts for Mulan still being one of the most famous characters in Chinese folklore, especially having started a tradition of woman warriors in Chinese literature.[12] Louise Edwards argues that these woman warriors attained fame by comparing their male deeds to the ordinary housewife, but this does not diminish their accomplishments: rather, it makes their contributions more virtuous, instead of being perceived as unacceptable.[13]

Men and Women in Confucian Gender Theory

Before analyzing crossdressing as a practice in Chinese society and theatre, it is imperative to discuss the Confucian gender norms that are being performed and imitated. While the portrayed ideal of the sequestered nature of Confucian Chinese women might lead some to believe that differences between the sexes and the way they were conceived would be quite stark

[10] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 151, 163, 165-166.
[11] Chang-Tai Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," *Modern China* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 169; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005): 14
[12] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 176; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 4, 34, 130; Louise Edwards, "Woman Warriors and Amazons of the Mid-Qing Texts Jinghua Yuan and Honglou Meng," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (May 1995): 226-227; Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 170; Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 230, 233; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xi.
[13] Edwards (1995), "Woman Warriors and Amazons of the Mid-Qing Texts Jinghua Yuan and Honglou Meng," 245.

and strictly attributed to men and women, this was not necessarily the case -- healthy members of society were conceptualized in terms of flexibly attributed aspects of femaleness and maleness as *yin* and *yang*, with expected shifts in balance over time, as Susan Mann notes with a general lack of binarism in Chinese medicine.[14] As sex and gender can be fluid and sometimes indeterminate, the notions of femininity and masculinity in Confucian China often relate to one another in a complementary system.[15]

Men: The *Wen* and *Wu* Paradigm

Males under the Confucian societal structure are theorized in terms of *wen* and *wu*, which refer to scholarly and martial males respectively. Masculinity as an ideal is argued to be constructed biologically as well as culturally, which infers that while someone can be culturally recognized as male, there are still some base differences between men and women, as socially and culturally defined by Confucian gender theory.[16] Crossdressing women like Mulan and Zhu Yingtai, who uses crossdressing to enter the civil examination system, while embodying *wu* and *wen* during their temporary successful entries into the male world through dress and gesture, are not sufficiently male, and cannot be fully considered on the *wen*/*wu* paradigm as they are biological women, which Kam Louie and Morris Low argue acts as a regulative ideal that performs an oppressive function towards women, preventing them from acting in the public sphere as men do.[17] As their forays into the male world are preceded and made possible by male dress, this is not an unreasonable argument to make. However, one must caution interpreting this oppression as malicious, as it is more likely to be inconceivable to Confucian society for women

[14] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 138.
[15] Kam Louie and Louise Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," *East Asian History* 8 (Dec 1994): 135.
[16] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 136.
[17] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 139, 140-141; Kam Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan* eds., K. Louie and M. Low (London: Routledge, 2003): 4.

to perform in these roles, as opposed to demonstrating an active dislike of women that leads to their oppression.

Wen males are idealized as sensitive, educated males and were considered to be a sign of sophistication and civility in China, and were not considered to be weak despite their dispositions.[18] Yigang Wang argues that *wen* males' idealized existence can be explained by the literati who wanted to perpetuate their own lifestyles, the belief in *yin-yang* balance in men and women making a male that possesses femininity the ideal being without flaws, as well as possible Han antipathy towards more martial non-Han rulers in the Yuan (1279–1368) and Qing dynasties in particular.[19] Given this lofty central position, it is not surprising that *wen* males were generally preferred over their *wu* counterparts in literature until the twentieth century.[20]

Wu males, on the other hand, are concerned with martial might, though it is not necessarily the complete opposite of *wen*'s civility and educational character, as *wu* males are idealized to know when to use force in their dealings.[21] While *wen* males were generally preferred throughout Chinese history, this is not to say that *wu* males were necessarily undesirable, as men could be considered both *wen* and *wu*, with the Emperor as one of the examples of these kinds of males.[22] Louie and Edwards make good use of the Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) as an exemplar of *wen* and *wu* attributes, with his noted victories against Taiwan, Mongol rebels and Tsarist Russia, all the while being noted for the creation of the Kangxi dictionary as one of the greatest emperors of Chinese history.

---

[18] Yigang Wang, "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China," in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, eds., K. Louie and M. Low (London: Routledge, 2003): 41, 43.
[19] Yigang Wang, "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China,", 44; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 136.
[20] Yigang Wang, "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China,", 41-42, 45; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 145.
[21] Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 7.
[22] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 140, 143.

As will be discussed in adaptations of *Mulan* in the twentieth century, preference for *wu* males began to grow alongside a growing distrust of Chinese intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie with their connections to a Confucian past. It is important to note that despite literati preference for wen males, Mulan's version of masculinity as it is presented in the original ballad and subsequent versions was not contested by the literati who primarily enjoyed them up to the end of the Qing Dynasty, which can be attested to by the number of extant versions of these adaptations.

The balance of *wen* and *wu* were considered to be essential to good long-term strategies for rule of family and of self-control.[23] Both *wen* and *wu* males were also expected to be able to contain their sexual passions, though the concern with excessive promiscuity was more about the object of these desires, rather than the desire itself.[24] The vigorousness of the *wu* male, in comparison to the sensibility of the *wen* male is sometimes imagined in terms of the relationship between *yin* and *yang* of men and women, and translates towards the way same-sex relationships were perceived. While the penetrating male was not entirely blamed for pursuing their desires in these situations, the situation is perceived as more dire when considering the penetrated male, as these kinds of desired were considered to be out of control and were subject to gossip, because women were typically considered to be the penetrated part of the penetrating/penetrated dichotomy, particularly from the mid-Qing Dynasty onwards.[25] Even the males who initially had homosexual relationships eventually enter into heterosexual ones, as Susan Mann argues, with same-sex relations as a last resort for these unfulfilled desires, which she argues places them back in the (rightful) penetrator role.[26] While this view is coloured by more modern perceptions

[23] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 143.
[24] Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 6.
[25] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 139.
[26] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 139.

and might not fully reflect the complex reality of same-sex relations in historic China, the dynamic Mann is considering here is of importance. Thus, the *wen/wu* paradigm is similar to that of *yin/yang* in its complementary nature and preferences for one over the other, with broad similarities that can still refer to Chinese males as a mostly unified term.

Public demonstration of *wen* and *wu* masculinities as participants in the public sphere also correspond to the dichotomy of *wen/wu*, as they are referred to in relation to national government and personal enlightenment.[27] *Wen* males were to aspire to the civil examinations, and *wu* males were celebrated for their military feats as public demonstrations of manliness, as well as participating in Qing martial exams.[28] Given the preference towards *wen* males in general, education became a powerful part of the right to rule for males and is closely integrated with nationalist concerns in both modern and contemporary China.[29] As an expression of power, education was then linked with desirability in males, which leads to the rise of the scholar-beauty genre.[30] *Wu* men, on the other hand, were not initially considered as attractive but their central role during the 1930s and 1970s promoted them in the interest of martial vigour becoming a preferred expression of masculinity in China, though Wang argues to the "mindless" nature of the peasants that embodied *wu* even in the communist context, where *wu* males were always being shadowed by the *wen* central elite.[31] This hegemony was only challenged in light of aforementioned twentieth-century failures of the elite to defend the nation during the May Fourth period and the pushback against intelligentsia, and by extension the bourgeois, during the Cultural Revolution, as the search for "natural potency" was preferred over sensitive, distant men

[27] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 140.
[28] Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 4-5; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 141-142.
[29] Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 5-6; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 144.
[30] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 146-147.
[31] Yigang Wang, "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China," 46

that had little connection to the masses.[32] Nonetheless, brotherhood and comradeship was celebrated, though men were clustered in their interactions by social class, so it would not be until the rise of the communist regime in China that these closer interactions and comparisons would be more visible.[33]

Women: *Funü, Nüxing, Nüren* and Perceptions of Women in Confucian Gender Theory

Like men, women in Confucian society were conceptualized along high standards of virtuosity that aimed to regulate and reinforce patriarchal structures, as well as secure the health of society, since women were tasked with raising children. Women were meant to follow four core Confucian values: chastity and fidelity, womanly words, bearing and work, and obey the three obediences to their fathers, husbands and future sons.[34] This essential connection to the family manifests itself in the fact that prior to the rise of Chinese feminism, there was no general term to refer to a Chinese woman outside of the home, and all the associated terms referred to a woman's relative position in a family to her responsibilities as a daughter, a wife, and a mother, with the collective term being *funü.*[35]

Traditional values for Chinese women pertained to proper conduct when interacting with one's in-laws, as well as body specific regulations like footbinding and chastity, though chastity, as seen in the Qing Dynasty will prove to be one of the most important virtues, which informs subsequent versions of Mulan despite it not appearing in the original ballad.[36] Similar to *wen* males in the late nineteenth century, women were subject to shifts in conceptualization in

[32] Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 146; Yigang Wang, "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China," 48; Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 9.
[33] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 142.
[34] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 115
[35] Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 37, 40, 45.
[36] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 233; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 31-32.

Chinese society under progressive and emancipatory rhetoric. With *nü* previously referring to unmarried women, the coining of *nüxing* in the 1920s rhetoric of the May Fourth Movement was meant to upend Confucian values by creating a biological definition of a woman outside the confines of the home as a sign of modernity, though it was later replaced by *funü* once more by communists aiming to promote patriotism in decent women and maintain the health of the nation in promoting family production.[37] *Nüren* was eventually used to confer personhood to women as a universal term.[38] These shifts in naming and categorizing women manifest within adaptations of *Mulan,* as her status as moral exemplar necessitates a shift in the ways that Mulan expresses her femaleness to audiences through contextual cultural markers. These shifts in conceptualizing women infer the perception of the ideal woman in these works, and establish a general narrative of the changing definitions from the original ballad to present works.

Women in Confucian society were considerably less flexible than men in terms of what was permitted and proper as they were saddled with the responsibility of raising future generations that would continue to contribute to the state.[39] Naturally, this meant that norms concerning women were primarily concerned with their virtue, and maintaining appearances as symbolic capital that would either enhance or destroy family reputations.[40] The ideal woman was cloistered within her home for the purposes of protecting her chastity, so that the only plausible threat to a woman would be within her own home since their husbands and fathers and sons would be out of the home for work and trade.[41] While some women did venture outside of the

[37] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 37-40, 53-55.
[38] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 50.
[39] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play,* 33.
[40] Janet M. Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* ed., S. Brownwell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 56.
[41] Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," 48, 52.

home for work, hobbies, or companionship, it was generally frowned upon unless there was a perfectly good reason for it, such as Mulan's crossdressing to serve her father's needs.[42]

The purpose of protecting a woman's chastity had several aspects to it. The "chastity cult," as Janet Theiss describes it, began in Yuan Dynasty state regulations that required specification of age, social status and length of widowhood to acknowledge faithful widows, which continued into the Ming and Qing Dynasty, with the state taking personal stakes in maintaining this cult.[43] Chastity was central to the paradigm of virtue that informed notions of gender difference and proper behavior in Qing China, and it served to promote virtue and propriety in Chinese women, as they were considered to be the cornerstone of civility in society.[44] Refusal to remarry after a husband's death or committing suicide were once widely considered a legitimate and virtuous response to situations where their chastity could be threatened once more.[45] Upholding these practices made women good wives, as their virtuous deeds guaranteed the health of the state and society at large.

Maintaining their chastity helped to ensure they would be suitable wives, which made marriage important for the maintenance of society. Virtuous daughters would become virtuous wives, guaranteeing virtuous descendants and anchoring *funü* in the ritual life of the family.[46] Here, women are being gendered by protocol, and societal actors sought to civilize within the women's quarters to ensure civilization of the general cultural level.[47] Ideal women, as described by Tani Barlow in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, were expected to be meek and

[42] Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," 22-23, 26; Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," 53, 56.
[43] Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," 47-48
[44] Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," 47-49, 58.
[45] Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," 47, 58; Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis," *American Historical Review* (Dec 2008): 1407
[46] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 41-42.
[47] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 41-42, 48.

submissive women who knew their place and would serve their in-laws as they would their own parents.[48] Seemingly, acting virtuously in this way was considered the standard for women at the time, though with societal unrest rising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, meekness eventually gave way to the high spiritedness that is trademark of Chinese patriotism in the twentieth century.[49] As women were considered the cornerstone for the quality of Chinese society, so too were they equally blamed for China's perceived backwardness with repeated defeats by the West.[50] Crossdressing works featuring women from this semi-colonial period feature this marked shift of women, though they still elected to use crossdressed women instead of making women direct social actors.

Crossdressing as Practice in Regular Life and in Theatre

Important aspects to consider when discussing Confucian gender theory in relation to crossdressing are the occasions of interaction between men and women in Chinese society, and the discourses that refer to each other in defining their roles and characteristics. Regardless of their sex, filial piety was expected of children, manifested along gender lines as *xiao* (filial piety) with the loyalty of the father-son relationship, and *jie* (chastity) for daughters.[51] Together, they promoted the continuity of Confucian society with their independent yet equal contributions. In other aspects, however, men and women remained quite separate. Intermingling was a concern of the state beginning in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, which led to a ban of women on the stage. This fear for the destruction of binarism of Chinese society led to men and women spending most of

[48] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 46.
[49] Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism,* 45, 50.
[50] Hershatter and Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis," 1409.
[51] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 233.

their time with those of the same-sex, which had implications for theatre and opera, as female parts still needed to be performed, leading to the practice of crossdressing in theatre.[52]

Enforced divisions between *yin* and *yang* and men and women made the divisions between them starker even as feminine men became the ideal state of being in the Qing Dynasty, though scholars are divided on whether this made women "complimentary" or "opposite" to men, though Louie and Barlow argue that the true opposite of men and women are not each other, but someone who has been castrated or is impotent.[53] While this comparison seemingly excludes most women, women would likely be similarly considered as infertility would render women just as exceptional to the rule as castrated and impotent men in their inability to contribute to the state through reproduction. These special cases defy Confucian gendering, which suggests that performativity in gender is important in understanding Confucian gender norms and, by extension, crossdressing in China. As will be seen through the analysis of crossdressing as used within Chinese society as well as a trope in *Mulan* adaptations, the discourse surrounding the interactions of men and women through crossdressing proves to be as important as the aims of those who crossdress to achieve their goals.

As a cultural practice and a theatrical trope, Chinese crossdressing readily invites discussion of the interplay of gender, sex and performativity. Crossdressing as used in regular life and in theatre are thought of as quite indistinguishable, and they are both impactful on Chinese society as a whole, though part of the entertaining and provocative appeal lies in the uncomfortable conflation of "real" and "fake" identities.[54] Crossdressing is argued to be an

---

[52] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 142; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003): 44-45, 53, 57, 59; Hui-Ling Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," *TDR* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 131-132.
[53] Yigang Wang, 43; Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities," 8; Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 43-45, 54; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 139; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 136.
[54] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 152.

aestheticizing of gender instead of merely being a parody of them, which would suggest that there is not much that is being threatened by the practice on stage.[55] Altenburger argues that gender in terms of crossdressing is an achieved status that ascribes biological characteristics with the interplay of biological and social variables, and cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity allow crossdressing and gender bending to occur.[56]

The acceptability of crossdressing in China was dependent on the temporary aspect of its use. The problematic widespread use of transvestism and transgenderism as a substitutable word for crossdressing in many studies on the topic would almost suggest all crossdressing in China was inherently transgressive and progressive for its time.[57] This is deceiving, as the temporary and ultimately unchallenging nature of such crossings is likely what guaranteed entertainment value and the entertainment of fantasy and illusions in an enjoyable manner by Chinese audiences, and the translucence of disguise is an inherent part of crossdressing.[58] Crossdressing women were a nonthreatening and forgivable transgression and were sometimes celebrated for their masculine deeds, provided that they remained unchanged and untouched.[59] Crossdressing as used for as sexual pleasure with crossdressed male actors and concubines reveals a process that reiterates and reinforces existing Confucian gender roles instead of challenging them, which demonstrates a higher consciousness and acceptance of gender difference, instead of a desire to

[55] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 167.
[56] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 172.
[57] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 170; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 131, 133, 135, 141; Sarah E. Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," *difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 130-132; Jiang Jin, "Women Playing Men: Same-Sex Relations in Republican China." Masters' Thesis. East China Normal University (2011): 4-5, 8; Lisa Brocklebank, "Disney's 'Mulan': the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" *Marvels and Tales* 14, no. 2 (2000): 272.
[58] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 170-172, 193; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 134; Sophie Volpp, "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed., S. P. Ramet (Routledge, 1997):144; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xii.
[59] Jie Guo, 26-27; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 133-134; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 171.

gradually discard them in favour of eventual equality.[60] These restrictions ultimately provided obstacles for considering crossdressing as an entirely transgressive and disruptive practice.

Crossdressing in Real Life

Actors as a class, especially with their crossdressing roles on the stage, were not viewed in a positive light by the state or by the upper classes even to this day. Yuan theatre was not necessarily espousing radical cultural production as actors and actresses were considered part of the lowest rungs of society, commonly associated with sex workers for their "untrustworthiness", and it was considered degrading to family honour to be associated with an actor or actress.[61] The Yuan state segmented actors and actresses from the general public, required them to wear special clothing to designate them as actors and actresses at all times, and the men were barred from taking the civil examinations.[62] *Dan* actors, the general term for female roles in opera, in particular were seen as treacherous with their ability to cast illusions to bypass hereditary boundaries and infiltrate the ranks of the literati.[63] Practices like *xianggong*, where boys impersonated women as part of prostitution rings, were seen as subversive because of their obfuscation of masculinity and femininity, though actors as a group were already coded intrinsically feminine, partially due to the inherent necessity of *dan* actors and the rise of their sexual availability to the elite.[64] Gender crossing was interesting provided it was temporary, but

[60] Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 35; Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 138, 140.
[61] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera*, 50; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 134-135; Sophie Volpp, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): 6.
[62] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 134.
[63] Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China*, 6.
[64] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 137; Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 138; Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 145.

true gender passing and androgyny were sometimes frowned upon, with the exception of feminine men of the Qing: rhetoric in fictional settings was preferred to Confucian society.[65]

As mentioned above, the ban of women from the stage in the eighteenth century encouraged further change in casting practices from the Yuan Dynasty that resulted in the absence of women, though representation of gender through dress and gender is evidence of a regulation and interaction of gender differences that takes place both on and off-stage.[66] Actresses would often use male dress off-stage to access male life, and they often had access to literary education, which transgressed the limits of their sex as women with "male skills".[67] In late Qing theatre, feminist activists, influenced by Western societal structures that they witnessed abroad and, especially, in the treaty ports, also used crossdressing as a method to challenge pre-existing restrictions on them.[68]

Crossdressing in Chinese Theatre

Crossdressing as it appears in theatre is more palatable than any considered in regular life, as fictional depictions can enjoy identification with the craft without transgressing Chinese society.[69] As an often parodic trope, it could be used to mock expressive models of gender and notions of "true" gender identity, or explore ideas of empowerment and heroism, but due to their generally temporary nature, they continue to be considered entertaining.[70] Theatre performed in this manner is flexible, but still reinforces societal paradigms in the characters' eventual return to normalcy. Here, one can see an exploitation of the confusion between actor and character,

---

[65] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance,", 168; Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 35; Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 130; Laikwan Pang, "Photography, Performance and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 66.
[66] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 130-131, 133-134.
[67] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 134, 139; Louie and Edwards, "Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing Wen and Wu," 141.
[68] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 138, 140-141.
[69] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 157.
[70] He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 151.

masculine and feminine, and oftentimes the gender created by performance is more desirable than the original that was being imitated.[71]

Female crossdressers in late-imperial Chinese theatre had the advantage of China having been shaped by cultural ideas of femininity, as well as the inherent profitability of their bodies, as Siu Leung Li notes that attractive females were enough to sell tickets on their own.[72] Though they were initially restricted to singing roles only, audiences were willing to watch females on the stage as well as enjoy stories with this trope within it, as Chinese audiences could interpret their crossdressing as a willful dressing 'up' to male roles and could explain the transgression with the inherent inferiority of daughters to sons.[73] With the use of dress and gesture as tools for manipulation of their audiences, female crossdressers made pretty, delicate and feminine male personas that were similar to the feminine male personas that were favoured in the Ming and Qing dynasties.[74] Crossdressed actresses would use fans and flowers within their costumes to subvert their transgression and provide a constant reminder of their true sex, which may have helped to mitigate the shock of seeing women as men.[75]

While female crossdressing was prominent within the scholar-beauty genre of the early-mid Qing period when women entered the public sphere mainly to meet their suitably scholarly husbands, often when women were on stage playing roles of women crossdressing for various purposes, they were also subverting female behavior in an acceptable manner as they were sufficiently skilled to perform as well as or better than males as the heroines with the promise to

[71] Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 140-141, 144-145; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 34; Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 131
[72] Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 139; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 29.
[73] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 56; Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 132; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 171
[74] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 172; Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 32.
[75] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 135.

return to the domestic sphere.[76] This return provided the tension and anxiety that made these plays exciting, especially with emphasis on the chastity of the heroine in Ming and Qing Dynasty works.[77] Ming plays specifically add marriage as the happy ending for heroines like Mulan and Huang Chonggu, who crossdressed to enter the civil examination system and got first place in examinations, and these tropes influenced iterations of other plays.[78]

Male crossdressers, as discussed above, are interesting in that they do not necessarily revert entirely to masculinity once their purpose for doing so is no longer necessary once discovered: instead, they co-opt positive feminine traits that attribute virtuosity with soft features and sensitive personality as embodiments of a perfect *yin/yang* balance.[79] Though men were seen to be crossdressing for theatre before women, the ban of women from the stage sees a rise in male crossdressing that borders on fetishism for the elite literati who enjoyed the erotic undertones in *caizijiaren* (scholar-beauty romances), *huapu* (flower guides), and *dan*.[80] These feminized male actors expressed their femininity through common cultural markers like rouge and *caicao*, an imitation of women's bound feet, which only sought to feminize them further.[81] The direction of transgression was evidently important, as crossdressing males were sometimes seen as threatening to masculinity as a penetrated male and male literati were scolded for patronizing male courtesans, as opposed to a crossdressed female that may at best wish to occupy male roles otherwise unavailable to them and could be perceived as valorous.[82] On the other

[76] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 172-173; Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 137; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 33-34; Ying Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," *Late Imperial China* 33, no. 2 (Dec 2012): 119-120, 124; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 89.
[77] Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," 121, 126.
[78] Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," 122.
[79] Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 19, 24, 30-31
[80] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 31-33, 37; Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 20-21, 30, 32; Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 145.
[81] Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," 136; Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 145; Pang, "Photography, Performance and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," 71; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 33; Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 33.
[82] Altenburger, 171; Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 146.

hand, *caizijiaren* could still be considered phallocentric as these males still marry wives and concubines, and their wives were still responsible for raising children and encouraging increased progeny through finding more concubines for their husbands, and thus are not falling short of Confucian expectations for males.[83]

One other question that ought to be answered when discussing crossdressing in theatre is why it is specifically being used, and what these plays mean for the audiences who enjoy them. While it is a morally acceptable plot device for most, it is also entertaining in many ways, such as facilitating fantasies, providing a subtle means with which to make social commentary, and as a temporary pause from well-behaved narrativity and points of view with the addition of complexity and drama.[84] The tradition of woman warriors was quite popular in Chinese theatre and opera, likely because while there were temporary transgressions as part and parcel of the act of crossdressing, no changes to societal structures are actually being made, and no destabilization occurs as a result.[85] While discovery of the true identity of the crossdressed character is usually met with shock or wonder, the uneventful transfer between male and female without much reflection on the matter make these plays a palatable experience overall.

Examples of Crossdressing in Theatre: *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* [*The butterfly lovers*]

Due to its popularity, crossdressing as a genre of theatre and opera has seen a wealth of plays and operas with characters as beloved and well-known as Mulan, with the late imperial period seeing much of the crossdressing in theatre.[86] One of these such works is *The Butterfly*

[83] Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 23-24.
[84] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 112; He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 166; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 171; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 33-34; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177; Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 31.
[85] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 35; He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 165; Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 130-131.
[86] Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 32

Lovers, which has titillated audiences for as long as the varying adaptations of *Mulan*. In it, Zhu Yingtai crossdresses to get an education and take the civil examination. Along the way, she meets Liang Shanbo, with whom she falls in love. After many near misses of Liang and the other students discovering her true sex, she is called back home at the behest of her father. Liang sees her off, and Zhu attempts to subtly hint at her true identity, but he does not understand any of her thinly veiled messages. Frustrated, she offers to set up Liang with her "sister" but, unbeknownst to Zhu, her parents have arranged her marriage to Ma Wencai. While the reasons for Liang's death are contested between differing adaptations and scholarly interpretations of *The Butterfly Lovers*, his death plunges Zhu into despair.[87] On the way to the wedding procession, an ominous wind prevents further advancement of the wedding party, and they are stopped incidentally near Liang's grave. Zhu visits it, and begs for the grave to open. Miraculously, it opens, and Zhu willingly throws herself inside as an extreme act of chastity. In some versions, this action includes the disappearing skirt trope, where her skirt is whipped off of her just before she jumps into the grave, potentially as a metaphor for her desire to return to the male friendship that Zhu and Liang had before she was revealed to be a woman. Zhu and Liang become butterflies and fly off together, never to be separated again.

The Butterfly Lovers is one of the most famous Chinese folktales, and Zhu Yingtai has subsequently been elevated to the status of a deity, as many pray at the Liang Shanbo temple for eternal love in relationships.[88] While perhaps not as provocative as some of the women-authored *tanci* with similar female heroines, the interplay of masculinity and femininity as Zhu transverses

[87] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 176, 194, Sookja Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor: 2018): 40.
[88] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 109; Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 118; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 166-167, 175

the male and female spheres is nonetheless compelling as an exploration of female fantasy.[89] *The Butterfly Lovers* has had different influences inserted into it like *Mulan*, from anti-feudalism to feminist rhetoric in the 1950s.[90] The reason for Zhu's crossdressing has been theorized to have been from part of a genuine interest in the male world, to Zhu looking for a suitable scholarly husband as part of the scholar-beauty genre.[91] No matter what the cause, the crossdressing is not considered grave and deceptive enough for it to be rejected by Confucian society, though Zhu has been criticized for having entered the male world without a more valorous purpose.[92]

Part of what makes the story so compelling is not Zhu, but Liang: how does he miss all the signs that Zhu is a woman, and not a male scholar? The eighteen-mile walk Liang takes with Zhu on her way home has been pored over by many, and the explanations given for the continued success of her disguise are attributed to a variety of reasons, including Liang's obliviousness or stupidity, and the effectiveness at which Zhu has exemplified feminine maleness through male camaraderie and success within the education system, which suggests that the male persona must be irreparably shattered for Liang to see Zhu as female.[93] His struggle in understanding Zhu's inferred hints is somewhat similar to the bemused questioning of gender roles in the last lines of the original Mulan ballad, in stating that it may be more difficult than one might assume in determining males from females when they physically appear the same. Liang is quite disappointed to find that she is female, though some would suggest that he was more disappointed at the loss of a treasured male friend: he cannot continue this friendship with

[89] Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," 119; Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," 567.
[90] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 115-116.
[91] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 114; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 182-183
[92] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 173, 181, 184
[93] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 119-120, 122; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 172, 185-186, 188; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 121.

her as a woman, because no structure existed within Confucian society to permit this sort of friendship.[94] Some even suggest, like Siu Leung Li, that there is a latent and ambivalent queer tension between Zhu and Liang, with Liang unknowingly growing fond for what appears to be a male with quite female attributes.[95]

Nevertheless, when Zhu is discovered to be female, she cannot return to the male disguise as a lasting rupture has been made and she kills herself soon after, which Anna Wing Tso Bo suggests is punishment for breaking moral code.[96] Jumping into Liang's tomb, Altenburger argues, is a willful negation of her female self, and possibly an expression of her chastity, which perhaps negates her transgressions. Siu Leung Li suggests that the suicide of Zhu is a last flaunting of patriarchal authority, though because Zhu works within this system, it is debatable whether or not Zhu intended to reject patriarchal society.[97] The issue of Zhu and other crossdressed heroines in the end of their stories is a resolution to the tension of substituted men in the public sphere.[98]

The ending of *The Butterfly Lovers,* for example, does have some changes in the way the play ends, similarly to the way that Mulan's does over time. While the lack of extant texts and the popularity of oral tradition for the story of Liang and Zhu makes it difficult to ascertain the entire growth of the story and its endings, the distinction within scholarship that separates twentieth century versions from pre-twentieth century ones suggests that *The Butterfly Lovers* was subject to similar shifts in tastes and agendas.[99] While scholars like Altenburger and Sookja

---

[94] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 170, 176-177, 193; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 123.
[95] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 109.
[96] Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 121; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 181, 193-194
[97] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 114-115.
[98] Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," 122; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 97-98, 118; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 192.
[99] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 168-170; Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 15

Cho acknowledge that differing adaptations of *The Butterfly Lovers* are 'autobiographical' in nature and are generally akin to being a 'chorus' of the same story and see consistencies in studying and being buried together, there are some notable differences.[100]

Initial versions label Zhu as a "righteous wife" with her faithfulness to Liang in death, but other additions have been made to cater to audiences' tastes, such as Zhu transitioning towards desiring to enter schooling for personal gain in finding a worthy scholar to serve, and the farewell scene that has become the most favoured scene in the entire play.[101] The parting scene has been altered many times to suit audiences as a "sanctioned event" that allows for the addressing of unfulfilled desires and emotional residue that remains from the close friendship of Liang and Zhu.[102] Later adaptations feature an exchange of poetry as a way to expand on the romantic elements of the story, as well as the inclusion of a greater emphasis of the filial piety of Zhu and Liang, although they were not added simultaneously.[103] Other small references and additions were added since its first appearance in early medieval China (220-589), such as the butterfly reincarnation, which was popular in both Chinese and Korean adaptations to emphasize the romantic aspect of the play, Liang's lovesickness contributing to his death instead of the overwork that comes with his appointment as an official, and the inclusion of the disappearing skirt, which has been argued to be Zhu's refutation of her female self, as well as a reference to Zhuang Zhou's (369-286 BC) dream of being a butterfly in *Zhuangzi*.[104]

---

[100] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 170; Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 8-10, 16-18.
[101] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 182-183, 186; Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 10.
[102] Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 114-116.
[103] Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 113-116, 119, 121-122, 140.
[104] The butterfly dream is mentioned in Zhuang Zhou's Daoist philosophical text, *Zhuangzi*, which describes a dream he had woken from, and could not remember whether he was a man who had a dream of being a butterfly, or a butterfly who was dreaming he was a man, as a question towards the philosophy of consciousness; Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 176, 179; Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 32-33, 36-37, 40, 45.

For the most part, there is not as much politicization that occurs in *The Butterfly Lovers* as one will see in versions of *Mulan*, though it was eventually used by writers in the twentieth century to discuss the struggle of women's rights, themes of emancipation and the concept of marriages based on love, instead of Confucian obligation.[105] Both Zhu and Mulan successfully masquerade as men through a convincing projection of *wen* and *wu* maleness respectively through a Confucian lens, and are praised for their virtuousness and strength of spirit. The temporary aspect of their crossdressing, and the retaining of specific female attributes in their character (such as sensibility and emotional sensitivity) reduces their transgressiveness even in Zhu's case, and their adherence to Confucian cultural norms are generally constant through their adaptations, albeit through context-specific lenses. Crossdressing as it is seen in *The Butterfly Lovers* is as unproblematic as it is in renditions of *Mulan*, which similarly contributes a great deal to its continuing popularity.

Li Yu's *Lian xiang bang* [*Women in love*]

Another interesting example of female crossdressing is the playful experimentation seen in Li Yu's *Women in Love*.[106] The play follows two women, Cui and Cao, who have a different take on the scholar-beauty genre with the scholar in this relationship being the crossdressed Cui. The particular discourse that comes with this relationship is an intriguing one: on the surface, it appears to be solely a homoerotic relationship between the two women with the use of crossdressing solely to be able to express desire between two women but Cui, inserting herself into the role of the scholar, is imagined as an attractive male for Cao with her male lust towards Cao, and talent in the examination system.[107] While this relationship cannot truly be fulfilled

[105] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 167; Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea,* 3; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 111.
[106] Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 138.
[107] Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 138, 141.

because of their shared status as women, Cui's passing of the exam still results in Cao being "awarded" to her as would be expected in a regular scholar-beauty story, as Cui becomes a concubine to Cao's husband so that they may spend time together as sisters, and potentially be together reborn in their next lives.[108] One might assume that a relationship of this nature, even layered as it is, would be transgressive, but it is resolved with Cui returning to her female self, as well as the same-sex aspects not being the emphasis here with the relationship between Cui and Cao being defined in the terms of a pre-established heterosexual dynamic.[109] The flexibility of these otherwise rigidly set Confucian roles attests to the use of opera to explore provocative ideas in an entertaining manner, which is a common thread through crossdressing dramas.

Male Crossdressing in Theatre: *Nan wanghou* [*The male queen*]

Exploration of Confucian gender roles and themes of same-sex relationships and the intersection of the male and female spheres are evident in notable examples of males crossdressing as women in theatre as well as regular life, as previously discussed with the conception of gender in Confucian China. As one would infer from the discussion of masculinity and femininity, and crossdressing as it occurs with females becoming male, the intersection of maleness and femaleness is not strict, and Chinese audiences are surprisingly flexible with these concepts with both crossdressing females and crossdressing males.[110] Some degree of acceptance naturally must exist due to the very nature of theatre from the Yuan Dynasty on, especially as female roles still needed to be played on the stage, even as actresses later became available.[111] As a theatrical trope, a method of entertainment and a pursuit of fantasy, male crossdressing is acceptable within certain circumstances similar to female crossdressing, but with some key

[108] Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 139-140
[109] Kile, "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China," 130-131, 139, 143.
[110] Pang, "Photography, Performance and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," 71.
[111] Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China,* 143.

differences: while *tanci* writers have been shown to use their heroines to explore areas of female life that would not be accessible to the authors themselves, male crossdressers are praised by literati for adapting female characteristics as part of *dan* actor tradition, but go beyond this with the male courtesans that appear in the Qing Dynasty, as well as plays that demonstrate the (literati) opinion that males who were still essentially male with female attributes were not only an example of the perfect *wen/wu* balance but were a pinnacle of the *yin/yang* balance as well.[112] While being praised for adopting female traits inherently suggests that women are not entirely inferior to men, one must note that, generally speaking, women were not as free to do the same with male attributes, as there was still a public preference for males in the public over females well into the Qing Dynasty.

One play that demonstrates this preference is *The Male Queen*, which Sophie Volpp describes as a "Russian doll" of crossdressing, with complex layers of masculinity and femininity.[113] In this work based on the biographies of Han Zigao (538-567), of which only one extant *zaju* by Wang Jide (d. 1623) remains, Chen Zigao, after being captured by enemy forces and presented to the emperor as a gift due to his charming feminine beauty, uses his charms to seduce the emperor in a comedy of errors that results in the seduction of the emperor's sister as well.[114] Chen deliberately uses positive aspects of his female persona to rise through the ranks of the emperor's harem to eventually be crowned queen. Through his manipulation of the court hierarchy, he makes use of the femininity markers of past courtesans and the palace women such as makeup and ornamental decoration, but eventually discards them for his superior depiction of femininity, and obfuscates the femininity of the other women in the court as inferior.[115] Chen's

[112] Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 31-32; Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China,* 131.
[113] Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 140.
[114] *Zaju* is a form of Chinese opera that used a combination of prose, poetry, dancing, and singing, with emphasis on comedy.
[115] Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 141

complex exploration of visual and historical vagueness with his crossdressing and fusing of maleness and femaleness in misrecognition demonstrates the fetishizing of such interactions between actors and patrons, and crossdressed characters with their audiences.[116] It is worth noting that by the Qing Dynasty, there is a trend that generally tends towards the preference for the anti-masculine, though this does not necessarily infer preference for either males or females, as *wen* masculinity provides the basis for which these playful, yet sometimes calculating feminized males might be appreciated, both aesthetically and rhetorically.[117]

Chen claims that he no longer needs makeup beyond light kohl and minimal yellows and only requires a "flirtatious glance" to achieve his results, but goes beyond this in asserting that even if he lost favour with the emperor as a crossdressed male, he would still be able to return to maleness and continue to be useful as a warrior.[118] While the existence of this concept in a play does not necessarily confer societal acceptance of this kind of gender performativity in reality or on the stage itself, and might be as transgressive as Guo Li argues, the intricate interactions of gender, sexuality and performance in both the literal crossdressing of the actor or actress playing the lead, and the crossdressing within the play present compelling discussions of literati-actor relations as a whole.[119] Crossdressing, as Volpp notes, is quite common in theatre as a trope, so the transgressiveness is reduced in intensity in favour of the main themes and other cultural and historical references. Chen presents the illusion of being the "puppet" and the master of men like the emperor simultaneously, all the while discarding more traditional forms of feminine erotic

[116] Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China,* 148.
[117] Wu, "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," 19-21; Pang, "Photography, Performance and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," 71; He, "Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance," 165-166.
[118] Volpp (1997), "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," 141, 143-144; Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China,*, 153-154.
[119] Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," 580.

expression in a questioning of gender norms and their supposed connections to past cultural tradition.[120]

In *The Male Queen*, Chen contrasts in an intriguing way to other female crossdressers, whether they are successful and return to regular life, or are discovered and rejected. While Chen and the *xianggong* boys of Qing-era Beijing are allowed to internalize aspects of femininity and still be accepted as appealing males for the literati who enjoyed them, female crossdressing actors are all revealed or returned to their female selves for resolved endings. Those who accept their domesticity and prescribed roles in Confucian society generally return to happy and uneventful lives. This is evident in versions of *Mulan* outside of the Qing-era, though the Qing endings are unhappy as a result of the use of the suicide trope to express discontent with the contemporary Manchu government, as opposed to an actual demonstration of consequences for crossdressing.

As will be discussed with the analysis of portrayals of gender and crossdressing as seen in different adaptations of *Mulan*, despite her entry into the male world and presentation of male characteristics for her convincing disguise, she generally does not keep many of the male aspects she uses when she returns home from war. Feminine aspects of her personality remain, even underneath the disguise: emotional sensitivity and sensibility, a desire to return to domesticity via homesickness, and an aversion to exaggerated male piggish attitudes towards women are some of the female markers left in these works, potentially to gently remind the audience that she is not male. When Mulan is married off at the end of certain plays and movies, she even becomes

[120] Volpp (2011), *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China,* 13, 131-132, 148

bashful at the prospect of meeting her future husband, and projects an outward meekness, which contrasts with her battlefield boldness.

Other crossdressed females act similarly when they are revealing or have already returned to femaleness: Zhu Yingtai returns to domesticity and fulfills her obligations despite her grief of being separated from Liang, and Cui ends up marrying Cao's husband to forge a sisterhood with her in lieu of a fully romantic relationship. The direction of the transgression, Altenburger argues, is quite important, and decides what level of permanence is appropriate for the crossdresser.[121] Regardless, even as it theoretically challenges gender roles without changing them in reality, the ability of Chinese audiences to embrace crossdressers of different varieties without issue indicates that the aspect of circumstances that lead to the crossdressing to access different areas of life is more important than the crossdressing itself.

Even females who act in the public sphere *sans* crossdressing remain in the shadows of the males they dedicate themselves to, or remain entirely out of the patriarchal system as an impartial actor that is not denigrated because of their virtuosity and martial talent. These women in particular belong to the knights-errant genre, though they are so popular in China's martial arts craze that they deserve attention as a genre of female knights-errant. While Mulan herself is not technically a knights-errant, there are similarities in the way that she conducts herself in order to save her father, inasmuch as her actions counter the desires of the ruling patriarchy even as they uphold it. Situating her adaptations in relation to this genre help to explain how the woman warrior trope continues to be enjoyed by audiences, as well as centering her sense of justice

[121] Altenburger, "Is it Clothes that Make the Man?: Crossdressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore," 171.

between her male and female selves, which will be illustrated through a discussion of the female knights-errant genre as it is seen in Chinese media and culture.

Chapter 2: Female Knight-Errants: The Appeal of Woman Warriors in Chinese Literature

Knight-errants in China emerged as a genre in ancient China, with sources pinpointing the origin between the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.) and the Warring States era (475-221 B.C.), though the shift in writing that developed the more trademark themes and narrative structures into what is currently known as knight-errantry began in the Tang Dynasty.[1] As inferred above, knight-errants are categorized by their individual acts of justice that operate outside of the law on their own senses of morality, and are often seen to have magical powers in addition to their inherent martial skill.[2] Given this position, some were condemned for their acts as they were generally outside government rule and Chinese society, and naturally defied authority as a result, but were praised for their consistency, chivalry and humility.[3] Because they did not brag about their benevolence, or use their status as a way to gain power, influence, or riches, they are not fully rejected and are popular subjects in the martial arts genre, particularly with their resurgence in the early twentieth century as a method of instilling patriotism and retribution into a humiliated China.[4] Although the appeal of the knight-errant lies in the generally apolitical nature of their agency, their image was nevertheless used to counter the "sick man of

[1] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (2019): 187; Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 206; Lan Dong, *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): 39.
[2] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 187.
[3] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 14, 37.
[4] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 37-38; Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 207-209; Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007): 36.

Asia" image by the late Qing and early mainland Republican periods.[5] These qualities are generally applied to both male and female knight-errants, but the female knight-errant is the more provocative curiosity, as they are not only outside of the influence of society at large, but they are also stepping out of the private sphere into the public sphere, often not crossdressed.

Female knight-errants are not as straightforward as Confucian gender ideals might imply. While they are accepted and praised for the same reasons male knight-errants are, they have their gender to consider as well. Strictly speaking, despite their relegation to the domestic sphere, women are not entirely absent from the battlefield and have been known to participate in battle with or without male influence.[6] Generally, warfare is the main cause for the neutralization of any violation of gender roles in what is often coined as "crisis femininity", though there is a cultural specificity that praises women's public participation being linked to a father/husband/son that they are acting with or in lieu of their active role.[7] Women have been known to use social upheaval to become bandits and rebels as to move out of the female sphere, but they are not generally included in records because of their outright defiance of political orders and violations of female virtues, such as chastity.[8] Such virtuosity is as important to female knight-errants as male ones.

As staunch defenders of Confucian households, heroic women make great sacrifices on the behalf of the men they are loyal to, and as such do not challenge societal structure as they subvert the idea of courage being a manly trait in a rather non-egalitarian way.[9] These actions

---

[5] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 62-63; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 240.
[6] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 15;
[7] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," *Media International Australia* 176, no. 1 (2020): 69; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 30; Louise Edwards, *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 2, 10.
[8] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 33-34.
[9] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, 1, 9-10; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 13.

generally relegate them to be role models that shame men into action, and sometimes even go as far as to challenge the notion of women as simply victims in substituting for failing male actors, where one might draw a comparison to Mulan's actions in defense of her father.[10] Naturally, virtuous women like these garnered much interest in premodern China in storytelling and theatrical formats despite their modest beginnings, and continue to garner interest well into the twentieth century as films emerged as a way for nationalist governments to insert patriotic discourse into the masses.[11] With this kind of proto-nationalist appeal existing even prior to China's steps into nationhood, perpetuating women warriors and female knight-errants as popular cultural icons, it is unsurprising that these characters are often almost imagined as real people: Mulan herself is often given this treatment despite no proof that she was a living person, or even an ethnic Han.

As non-transgressive public actors, the way that their prowess and identities are portrayed and perceived are thus subject to a general formula. Like male knight-errants, they conduct their actions in the pursuit of justice within their own moral code that is outside of general society, which enables their wandering when it would otherwise be frowned upon.[12] Filial piety, loyalty, and benevolence towards the weak and poor are common threads in the depictions and perceptions of female knight-errants.[13] As mentioned above, female knight-errants normally enter the male sphere through some kind of necessity, be it the failings of males as social actors around them, unsolved social or political unrest, self-fulfillment, or even personal retribution:

[10] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, 14-15.
[11] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 10-11; Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 185-187.
[12] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 14, 16, 36, 40; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 35, 38.
[13] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 187; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 47.

many notable female knight-errants are created when familial retribution and revenge is necessary.[14]

In order to successfully enter this realm, they must also be justified by means of exceptional martial skill and, in some cases, magical powers which aim to explain why these women were meant for the job. Naturally, these skills were usually meant to be obtained from their connections to male family members as opposed to their own accord, so it is not surprising to find that even those who were not trained find their heroics lionized as welcome forces in times of need.[15] Among the more notable forerunners of knight-errantry in martial arts fiction is Nie Yinniang, a highly skilled, independent assassin searching for a skilled warlord to serve in battle, and the Maiden of Yueh (496-465 BC), an independent swordswoman who serves the government with her innate skill and magical skills.[16] While Mulan is not a knight-errant, adaptations often draw from the genre in their additions of military skill originating out of female chivalry alongside her filial piety, and she is often mentioned as the "grandmother" of other woman warriors and crossdressed females.[17]

At first glance, these women could be considered transgressive to society in their decisions to exit their female domestic sphere and enter the male sphere, but in deferring to male authority and structures, it would hardly matter that female knight-errants crossdress based on convenience and not necessity because no aspects of society are altered as a result.[18] Valorous females risking life and limb in service of justice were quite appealing for audiences, and they

[14] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 196; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 45-46, 48.
[15] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 32, 42, 44.
[16] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 187; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 39
[17] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 36; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 17.
[18] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 14.

receive an upsurge in popularity by the mainland Republican era, particularly with the May Fourth movement that readily accepted androgynous or masculine females in the media, despite the more progressive nature of this period, female knight-errants were still expected to have extenuating circumstances for their actions.[19] Debates over the true equality of men and women continued well into the Maoist period (1949-1976), which arguably placed women equal to men, albeit under relatively masculine characteristics.[20] The existence of notable female knight-errant figures suggests that the interplay of acceptance and transgression was complex and not one-sided, as seen with real life knight-errants and the public trials of Shi Jianqiao (1905-1979), a female avenger from the early twentieth century who assassinated Sun Chuanfang (1885-1935) in 1935, who has received equal amounts of praise and condemnation, which will be discussed in further detail in this paper.[21]

In *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, Edwards argues that women in war and as spies garnered interest by challenging the view of women as solely life-givers, and presents the idea of women as harbingers of death as well.[22] While this is certainly true, it must also be acknowledged that this transgression cannot go so far as to outweigh the appeal of the martial prowess and the demonstration of virtue, or risk losing what makes it appealing to Chinese audiences. This interplay of martial prowess, gender roles and social transgression cannot be understated, even when considering female knights-errants outside of the twentieth century.[23] He Yufeng, a martial heroine from *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* [*Heroes and lovers*] written by Wen Kang

[19] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 192; Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 66.
[20] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 66-67; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 1; Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 185.
[21] Sun Chuanfang killed Shi Jianqiao's father Shi Congbin in 1925 after Sun's counterattack against approaching Fengtian forces, decapitating him and displaying his head publicly in Anhui.
[22] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 1.
[23] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 188; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 16-17.

(1798-1872) in 1878, for example, seeks revenge for her father, and saves other women from aggressive monks in the process, but eventually becomes a docile wife after her mission is completed.[24] In He's story, she only enters the male world on the orders of her father via filial piety, and the fact that she exits the male world after her task is finished is the example of true heroism in this story, as opposed to the deeds themselves.[25]

Famous Examples of Female Knight-Errants in Chinese History

There are countless of examples of relevant female knight-errants who are praised for their virtuosity and upholding of Confucian structures by defending the males in their lives. Xun Guan (303–?), daughter of Xun Song (ca. 263–ca. 329), for example, led soldiers to save her father in Xiangcheng with no concern for her own safety, and the mother of Zhu Xu (died 392), a Jin Dynasty (266-420) militarist well known for his role in the defeat of the Qin (351-394) army, and Lady Xian (516-602), best known for suppressing the Hou Jing Rebellion (547-550) in 550, were emphasized for their assistance in helping their sons fight rebels and defend their homes.[26] Princess Pinyang (590s-623), arguably one of the better examples for establishing gender equality through the posthumous title of Zhao (wise and virtuous) for her keen intelligence and virtue, still gained recognition for establishing the Tang Dynasty, a principally patriarchal government.[27] Qin Liangyu (1574–1648) is also a notable example of a female having been equal in skill to men in the military in her defense of the Ming Dynasty against the Manchus -- her martial excellence and strategic wisdom made her an "honorary male" -- yet there was more

[24] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 187-188.
[25] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 188.
[26] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 17-19. 26.
[27] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 20.

value in her maintaining Ming standards of ethics, like female chastity, and her defence of the government through opposing an anti-governmental uprising.[28]

This genre did not die with dynastic China, as seen through the prevalence of female knight-errants like the Red Lady, who was a prominent figure among mainland Republican martial heroines, which saw an upsurge in the popularity of martial arts films in the early twentieth century.[29] She is depicted in ways that reflect the female knight-errant tradition: her devotion to the males in her life is quite notable, in her faithfulness to her husband and son. She learns her military skills from her husband's family when it becomes vital for her safety and is ultimately secondary to actual males.[30] Despite her social transgressions and her popularity in a markedly more feminist mainland Republican period, this more or less aligns with general Confucian gender ideals. An analysis of the public trials of Shi Jianqiao (1905-1979), in terms of how the public respond and potentially identify with her transgressions and passion, as well as the use of specific gender expression by Shi herself to present herself as worthy of sympathy by the Chinese public, demonstrates how lasting cultural traditions and the emergence of a public sympathy that seeks to appeal to an innate Chinese consciousness explain the persistence of fictional heroines like Mulan to the present day, as well as how the use of a recent historical legacy is justified.[31]

Shi Jianqiao: A Twentieth Century Female Avenger

On the surface, Shi Jianqiao's trial in 1935 appears to be just a real-life example of filial revenge, carried out by a daughter for her father. As Eugenia Lean's work demonstrates,

[28] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 27, 29.
[29] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 189.
[30] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 189-90.
[31] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 3-4, 142, 150-152.

however, the intense media coverage and philosophical debates that followed demonstrate Shi and her legacy in China are similar to Mulan's: there are debates of old culture versus new culture, differing perceptions of women and womanhood, and considerations of the fragile conception of the Chinese nation as a unified whole as part of the discourse.[32] Both of the interpretations of these women warriors' femininity and temporary masculinity in the historic culture of Mulan and the modern culture of Shi Jianqiao, as shown through the different ways they are interpreted, often for the promotion of differing cultural and political agendas. In essence, Shi Jianqiao's trial demonstrates that there is a degree to which transgressiveness is forgiven, even when the actions committed are brutal and violent. While most adaptations of Mulan's tale, as will be later discussed, do not prominently feature her violent actions, they inevitably occur in wartime conflict and are excused in the context of filial piety.[33] The decision not to feature these prominently is potentially a way to preserve their femininity, but it may also demonstrate that the important aspect to be gleaned from these female warriors is their dedication, and not their prowess.

Shi's cold and calculated assassination of Sun Chuanfang (1885-1935), a warlord who killed Shi's father ten years prior, received intense media coverage and multiple works of fiction, including radio plays, theatrical productions, and serialized installments of literature.[34] As discussed above, the media coverage and rise of the use of mass culture to invoke sentiment in Chinese society explains the praise of dynastic virtues like filial piety in the mainland Republican era.[35] Ironically enough, Shi's assassination of a warlord was also interpreted as an example of anxiety towards the brutal and outdated aspects of China's warlord past. It was also

[32] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 1-2, 51
[33] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 23.
[34] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 2, 54
[35] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 15, 27, 52-53, 60-61

perceived as a criticism towards a government that did not punish Sun Chuanfang for his crimes, in equating Shi's personal vendetta to a national concern.[36] Regardless of what this may have meant for Shi beyond avenging her father, the state sanctioned this traditional revenge and pardoned her with mixed results, given that Sun Chuanfang was a known anti-Nationalist, but the idea of Sun needing to be criticized because of the failures of the government was not missed by contemporaries.[37] With this kind of endorsement, it would seem that Shi would become a symbolic hero of the likes of Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), but this was not the case in terms of leftist, progressive critiques: Shi was criticized for her feudal assassination as an outdated, cowardly sign of national chaos, similar to the condemnation Qiu Jin (1875-1907) received decades after her death after her rebellious activism and failed uprising against the Qing.[38]

Similar to the way Mulan's gender expression is tweaked to suit the contemporary tastes of the writer, Shi Jianqiao purposely adopted knight-errantry to create a more justified image for her actions. There are several nuances that come with how she is portrayed in the media, including the emphasis on her emotional sensibility and feminine frailty, the failures of other male members of her family to carry out the assassination, and contained sexuality as seen by her denial of marriage and passion.[39] Lean describes her use of knight-errantry as a way to demonstrate her extreme filial devotion as, Shi, in *Xianü fuchou ji ying pian* [*The account of the avenging female knight errant*], for example, desires to follow her father into battle, and after the announcement of her father's death, her call to action is justified by Shi not wanting to cause her stepmother additional pain by committing suicide in response to the terrible news.[40] The

[36] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 10, 13, 72, 153.
[37] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 28-29, 37, 93, 142, 146-147.
[38] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 84-85, 91-92.
[39] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 34-35, 37-40, 43-44, 47, 58, 100.
[40] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 56-57

effectiveness of this rhetoric demonstrates the relevance of knight-errantry even in the twentieth century, demonstrating how ancient values may still continue to be relevant in cherished treasured tales like the story of Mulan. The genre of female knight-errantry thus provides a connection between the past and the present in values that ought to be seen as dated at best, all the while using historic structures to discuss modern ideas.[41] Notable examples include Dragon from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* who uses her martial prowess as an asset to combat her arranged marriage and empowering her to defy roles by taking charge of her own destiny. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was famously readapted as a film by Ang Lee, as well as a television series in Taiwan and a comic series by Andy Seto. Zither, from *The Female Knight-Errant from Huangping,* is compelled by filial piety to learn magic to avenge her father who was killed by bandits. Eventually, she chooses to marry her love interest Sword, only after they have successfully completed her mission in both a demonstration of her martial virtue and filial piety, as well as discussing the contemporary issue of women choosing to marry instead of accepted in arranged marriages.[42]

The popularity of this genre, alongside a craze for martial arts films, was more prevalent by the 1930s as female knight-errants were seen as a positive role model of empowerment, particularly as gender roles were explored further in mainland Republican China, while still affirming them as a dangerous and contested ground between acceptability and transgression.[43] The genre naturally did not have unanimous acceptance, as the dislike of superstitious beliefs, supernatural beliefs and tricks that were associated with the new technologies of film and

[41] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 12-13, 155.
[42] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 192-201; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 49; Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 59.
[43] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 184-186; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 4, 199-200, 227, 233.

photography persist after the Qing defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-1860) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), but the dramatic attire and superpowers and martial might overall contribute to both an ambiguous and empowering female image, as well as the birth of a strong and martial nation, to counter China's reputation as the "sick man of Asia."[44] The Chinese Communist Party, having seen the potential of the effectiveness of propaganda including films, continued this trend, especially in wartime, although the messages were decidedly less challenging as they were more pro-state.[45] Evidently, the line of acceptability of attitudes towards the state within the literature, as well as towards female public actors in real life and in historic and modern Chinese media has been toed sufficiently since its early beginnings, as seen by the relatively stable narratives portrayed by woman warriors like Mulan, even in light of the general movement towards the normalization of women's rights and individuality to the present day.[46] Their continued existence implies a degree of acceptance of both the overall narrative and the actions of these woman warriors, which provides the basis for succeeding adaptations after the original *Ballad of Mulan*.

Chapter 3: Pre-Qing Dynasty Adaptations of Mulan: The Original Ballad and Beyond

While keeping in mind the historical and gendered aspects of Mulan, as she travels through over 1500 years of Chinese and, later, international culture, each version of *Mulan* will be considered in its cultural and political contexts, as well as analyzing the way gender roles of Mulan and other characters are portrayed, juxtaposed to their historic contexts. Each adaptation

[44] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 202, 204-205, 235; Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015), 40.
[45] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945*, 41; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 4.
[46] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 3.

adds to the overall development of Mulan as an emblem of woman and citizen, especially when she is used for increasingly politicized agendas beginning in the late Qing era. As Mulan generally never assumes a character that is unethical or immoral, and is not normally unpopular or obscure, one can posit that Mulan can be viewed in any points of her existence as an accepted version of how the ideal citizen may serve the penultimate authority, be it patriarchal structures in the family or patriotic ones of the state. Even versions that are not accepted by Chinese audiences, with Disney's versions of *Mulan* generally coming to mind, offer insight into how international audiences as well as Chinese ones, interpret the image of China's ideal citizen.

The Ballad of Mulan

The original *Ballad of Mulan*, as previously mentioned, is dated generally around the Wei period, ironically brought to China by a non-Chinese tribe called the Xianbei.[1] It is generally thought to have been originally featured in the *Yuefu shiji* [*Anthology of Yuefu poetry*] in the twelfth century A.D. by an anonymous writer, though there are claims that it originated in the *Gujin yuelu* [*Musical records of old and new*] which cannot be affirmed, as it no longer exists.[2] Other sources claim dates anywhere from the Jin Dynasty (317-439), the Liang Dynasty (502-517) and the aforementioned Northern Dynasty.[3] Naturally, the ballad cannot be considered as a single original, since the lack of extant texts leaves the possibility of hundreds of years of transmission, potentially in non-Chinese languages, and are lost to time.[4]

[1] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 188; Bohnenkamp, "An Anonymous Work from the Book of the Manor House of Lord Che," 326; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xiii.
[2] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xiii; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 56.
[3] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 52-53.
[4] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," *Arts (Basel)* 9, no. 78 (July 10, 2020): 78.

The Xianbei cultural origin inevitably muddles any claims of Mulan's cultural origins in China as it is conceived in scholarship today, particularly as few studies on the subject make reference to it. Nonetheless, the culture and history of the Xianbei must be acknowledged before making any analysis on the original ballad, as there are distinctive cultural influences that remain even as the tale is adapted by Confucian scholars, prompting her re-appearance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As conquerors of China, one might assume that the Xianbei would have an overwhelmingly dominant political and cultural position over the Chinese, and thus Chinese culture would resemble the Mongolic and Turkic influences that they would bring.[5] However, that relationship is not so simple, and resembles more a relationship of cultural exchange, prior to their sinicization and merging into Chinese culture.[6] This results, as Charles Holcombe argues, in a foundation for a newly synthesized Chinese culture that would reunify under the Sui and Tang dynasties.[7]

Even in the midst of tensions between ethnic Han and the Tuoba, who are most relevant in terms of Xianbei-Chinese relations, intermarriage, the use of Chinese languages and surnames, and the blending of the Xianbei and Chinese military results in a reformed Chinese culture that includes aspects of the Xianbei.[8] Ironically, the Rourans who are often chosen as the primary antagonists of adaptations of Mulan, potentially share origins with the Xianbei, which further confuses the cultural and chronological cohesiveness. While these adaptations are not about real people and are thus not wholly expected to tout historical accuracy, it is important to consider

[5] Charles Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," *Early Medieval China* 19 (2013), 4; Sanping Chen, "From Mulan to Unicorn," *Journal of Asian History* 39, no. 1 (2005), 23.
[6] Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 2-3.
[7] Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 13
[8] The Murong Xianbei are technically the initially prominent Xianbei tribe to interact with Han Chinese, which self-presented as both Chinese and as a tribal chieftain, with some of the notable blending that they are responsible for seen in keeping Chinese style schools and personally supervising civil examinations, and going as far as to enrol their own tribes within this system. The Tuoba Xianbei is the tribe most often mentioned in scholarship when mentioned at all, but it is important not to view the Xianbei as a monolith influence in Chinese history; Holcombe, "The Xianbei in Chinese History," 10, 24-25, 31, 33-35, 36.

these influences in adaptations of *Mulan* as part of a Confucian framework, as failing to do so is an oversimplification of the narrative.

Keeping Mulan's cultural origins in mind, the influence of the Xianbei is noted in the way that her martial prowess is included in the original ballad and subsequent adaptations. The fact that The *Ballad of Mulan* serves a Khan is one of the more obvious hints to her heritage, but this is often overlooked or equated to an emperor without much issue, which justifies some additional analysis.[9] While there is an undeniable connection between depictions of *Mulan* and the knight-errant genre, it is also equally important to emphasize aspects of her Tuoba Xianbei heritage. Xianbei women, unlike the ethnic Han culture at the time, encouraged and allowed women's public participation in their societies, and they were often noted for their skill in horseback riding and archery.[10] Thus, Mulan's martial abilities can be explained by her heritage, although it is equally plausible that she could have learned these skills out of necessity to save her father.

This is not to downplay the aforementioned cultural relationship between the Tuoba Xianbei and the Han, as the original ballad can be seen as a cultural hybrid through the blending of feminine duties at home and her prowess on the battlefield, as well as her filial piety, which is more explicitly a Han trait. Mulan's eventual domestication in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Confucian scholars inevitably blurs the line between Tuoba Xianbei attributes and Confucian orthodoxy, and thus makes for a contested claim to her true origins.[11] Sanping Chen argues that the steppe woman issue is sufficiently discussed in Chinese historiography, but depictions of

[9] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 58.
[10] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 53, 57-58; Lan Dong, "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 2 (Apr. 2006), 219.
[11] Ivy Haoyin Hseih and Marylou M. Matoush, "Filial Daughter, Woman Warrior or Identity-Seeking Fairytale Princess: Fostering Critical Awareness Through Mulan," *Children's Literature in Education* 43 (2013), 215-216; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.

Mulan as fighting against Rourans and other Mongolian tribes suggests that the Han Mulan identity is dominant, and thus the debate remains largely untouched.[12] In the end, she is still often considered as a real person, as well as an ethnic Han, demonstrating the seemingly seamless transition of these traits into the Mulan that is more commonly recognized in modern adaptations and retellings.

The ballad generally describes Mulan's filial piety and loyalty, with some emphasis on bonds formed despite inherent, albeit unknowing differences of gender characteristics and roles, sexual obscurity through one's change of dress, and that it was Mulan's deeds that made her a man -- not her biological sex.[13] This is evident through the ease with which she can change from male to female roles, by merely changing her appearance. Mulan is allowed to transgress her female roles through the help of her family and kin through discarding her female dress and acquiring armor and a horse at the market which will enable her to enlist in the army as a temporary male, though little mention is made of her "maleness".[14] This transgression is not addressed within the original ballad, due to its more temporary nature.

The ballad begins establishing Mulan's feminine character by placing her at the loom, which is considered to be a feminine task.[15] The narrator inquires into "who's in [Mulan's] heart, [sic] who's on her mind," to which she responds that no one is on her heart or mind; her sighs are caused by the grief she has for her ill and aging father being forced to go to war.[16] Here, it is implied that thoughts of romance are thought to be things that may usually be on a woman's

[12] Sanping Chen, "From Mulan to Unicorn," 23.
[13] Jing Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," *The Public* 18, no. 1 (2011): 65, 69; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xiv-xv.
[14] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xv; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 69; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," *Arts (Basel)* 9, no. 3 (2020), 78.
[15] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 347; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.
[16] Anonymous, "The Ballad of Mulan," 68.

mind. In order to protect her aging father, she resolves to go to war in his place, and buys her armor and horse as part of her transformation into a man.[17] No mention is made of her enthusiasm to go to war to defend her country; her only concern is keeping her family safe, as seen by the many reiterations of her filial piety throughout the ballad.[18] Her hardships in war are not mentioned in any part of the ballad, except for the descriptions of conditions of the harsh environment and the war. The ballad then jumps directly to Mulan being awarded for her victories in war, to which she responds that "[she] has no use for a minister's post," as her duties in the domestic sphere are more important to her than the spoils and valor of war.[19] Mulan then returns to her home and her domestic sphere, correcting any transgressions she made by crossing into the "man's world" as a woman; "tak[ing] off [her] wartime gown/And put[ting] on [her] old-time clothes."[20]

The ballad ends with an amusing quote after it is revealed that she is a woman, "The he-hare's feet go hop and skip/The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled./Two hares running side by side to the ground,/How can they tell if I am he or she?"[21] The amazement and lighthearted nature of this ending suggests that it is a vague hint at essential gender equality, and Mulan is simply congratulating her own resourcefulness and capability.[22] It is necessary to note that this reference to gender equality is likely not a proto-feminism, because of Mulan's requirement to dress and essentially be a man in order to "access" the male power seen in going to war. In addition, she relinquishes it as easily by returning home and dressing as female once

[17] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 184.
[18] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 349; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 180; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 21.
[19] Anonymous, "The Ballad of Mulan," 71; Allen; 350.
[20] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 350; Anonymous, "The Ballad of Mulan," 72.
[21] Anonymous, "The Ballad of Mulan," 72.
[22] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 867; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 189.

more. Nothing is changed in Mulan's transgression of male gender roles, and Mulan's role in the war as told in the ballad is not described to be particularly impactful.

Mulan's reputation as the quintessential Chinese woman warrior is made possible by her crossdressing, though the original ballad has considerably less emphasis on this aspect, in favour of the filial piety that inspires her to crossdress.[23] She requires no glory or compensation to do it, as saving her father from conscription is reward enough.[24] She becomes male in donning her male attire and equipment and goes undiscovered for the entirety of her service in the army. After rejecting a post within the government, she returns home and makes herself female once more with the application of makeup: this is the only time within the original ballad alongside her "cloud-like hair" where some mention of her appearance is noted, likely to emphasize her prior crossdressing and to leave any tensions from her transgressions behind. Her comrades are surprised to discover that she was female the whole time, they are struck by her beauty as an opposite to her maleness, and the poem ends with a bemused questioning of the differences and similarities between men and women.[25] The only significance her crossdressing makes is perhaps to intensify her filial nature, as she was willing to put herself in danger for her father and in that the demands of the state were so unreasonable and harsh that she was required to fill a male role, which Edwards argues serves as a muted critique towards unreasonable government demands.[26]

[23] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 347; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts,* xv.
[24] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177.
[25] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 350.
[26] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 348-349; Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 115; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 180-181; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 21.

Indeed, her deeds were not only acceptable within their circumstances, but she is heralded as a true filial daughter, a vague enough nod to Confucian values that guaranteed future adaptations.[27]

Mulan in the Tang Dynasty: Celebrations of Filial Piety

Mulan's next extant adaptations were written in the Tang Dynasty by Wei Yuanfu (d. 771) and Du Mu (803-852). While the core of the theme of the original ballad focuses on the demands of the state compelling a woman, who was not expected to participate in battle, to take her father's place out of filial piety, Wei Yuanfu's *Mulan ge* [*Song of Mulan*] (750) takes a more outwardly congratulatory approach in terms of Mulan's participation on the battlefield. As well, this version adds the old and infirm trope, which is drawn upon many times to justify her actions in future adaptations, making a daughter's duty as a citizen and as a dutiful child the main area of focus.[28] Once more, Mulan departs by removing her makeup and silk clothes and replacing them with armor with a "heart filled with courage."[29] As well, there is little mention of her exploits during the war, as the only mentions of her actions are her participation in the attack at Mt. Yanzhi and the capture of the Qiang, it is mentioned that the general has won the victory, and her contributions in the war were minimal. The ending of the ballad is particularly forward with its congratulatory attitude towards Mulan, as her return is lauded by the author in his high praise, "If the officials of this world/could display the same virtue/Their loyalty and filial piety would not be lost/Their fame would last through the ages."[30] While this could easily be interpreted as

---

[27] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 232; Wing Bo Tso, "Female Crossdressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions," 116; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 176-177.
[28] Hseih and Matoush, "Filial Daughter, Woman Warrior or Identity-Seeking Fairytale Princess: Fostering Critical Awareness Through Mulan," 216; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 66; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.
[29] Wei Yuanfu, *Song of Mulan* (750 AD), trans. Philip Naudus (2020), http://mulanbook.com/pages/tang/song-of-mulan.
[30] Yuanfu, *Song of Mulan.*

critical towards the government or the officials he refers to, it is evidently not critical enough that it would interfere with her cultural value.

Interestingly, there is a more deliberate need to resolve the tensions of her crossdressing in this adaptation, as Mulan's return in armor makes her parents sad, which is resolved by setting aside her armor. When her comrades see her after she has returned to her female self, they do not dare to approach her, as they are confused about their misrecognition of Mulan as male. The comparison of the value of males and females is also made more explicit here through her juxtaposition of the two sexes when she sings, "I was a valiant hero, but now I am a petite woman once again."[31] This version calls the value system into question as Mulan ends her song with the proclamation that a daughter is just as valuable as a son. Where the original version was coy and vague, Wei Yuanfu's ballad is more deliberate, though it is worth noting that Mulan has determined her value in being able to assume male roles as a male, instead of as a female. Just as one must resist the urge to affix the bemused rabbit analogy in the original *Ode to Mulan* with concrete ideas of gender equality, so too must one avoid interpreting this bold statement with feminist, modern perceptions because Mulan is still required to be "male."

Du Mu's Mulan Temple

Du Mu's four-line poem "Mulan Temple" also ponders the idea of femininity and masculinity as experienced by the crossdressed Mulan.[32] In it is depicted the inner struggle of being a crossdressed female in a male's position. Her male disguise is metaphorically stripped away to reveal her beauty as she is faced with the dilemma of socializing with males when she would otherwise not be allowed to do so, as the author asks if "she dare[s] [to] drink together

[31] Yuanfu, *Song of Mulan.*
[32] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 64-65.

with the officers".[33] The mention of Wang Zhaojun (b. 50 BC), a similarly famous female who is known for her incredible sacrifices in her marriage to the Xiongnu leader Huhanye Chanyu (d. 31 BC) in 33 BC in order to facilitate Huhanye's wishes to become an imperial son-in-law, and this idle comparison of her actions to Mulan's in poetry no doubt increased the virtuosity of Mulan, an aspect that continues to be emphasized up to contemporary adaptations.[34]

Mulan in the Ming Dynasty: Femininity and Light-Hearted Comedy in *Ci Mulan* [*The heroine Mulan goes to war in her father's place*]

Xu Wei's (1521–1593) play from the Ming Dynasty continues the saga of Mulan, with some minor additions that culturally signify Mulan as either male or female.[35] *The Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place* is part of a four-part collection of plays, including *Kuang gushi* [*The history of the mad drum*], *Cuixiang meng* [*A Zen master's dream of the land of green jade*] and *Nü zhuangyuan* [*A female degree holder*]. These four plays describe women taking the places of men in legal and civil service. The play is not concerned with any historical accuracies and was primarily for drama and entertainment, as it plays on themes of identity, performance, disguise and recognition, while presenting imposed cultural additions by Xu Wei.[36]

Xu Wei's *Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place* follows the same plot as the ballad, albeit with some additions needed for the length and drama that he desired. There is no glory for Mulan in going to war, as her actions merely fulfill the conscription demand.[37] While the emphasis on filial piety is retained in this Ming play through the use of the sickness trope, there is much greater emphasis within *Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place* on

[33] Du Mu, *Mulan Temple* (830 AD), trans. Philip Naudus (2020) http://mulanbook.com/pages/tang/mulan-temple-du-mu.
[34] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 65.
[35] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 130.
[36] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xiv, xvii.
[37] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 23-24.

Mulan as a female hero, and other female heroes in general, with references to female heroes such as the legendary Qin Xiu and Ti Ying (b. 174 BC).[38] In this play, Mulan is presented as an archetypal woman warrior and a woman who is bold enough to take male roles, and is later referenced as a predecessor of other future courageous Chinese women.[39] However, this play takes greater pains to assure the audience that she will remain chaste during her time in the military and that she will return untouched, which makes her a Confucian female hero instead of a empowered rebel, which thusly restricts her progressiveness to what was considered appropriate for the time.[40]

Much emphasis is made of her femininity throughout the play, such as the need to unbind her feet (with the reassurance that her feet will be rebound upon her return), her chastity had to remain intact during the war; she needed to remind herself of things such as "remember[ing] to bow like a man," and other aspects that could potentially reveal her true sex, such as relieving herself.[41] The aspect of footbinding in this version is used as one of the main markers of femininity, and it is a positive feature as shown by the reverence and dedication Mulan demonstrates in keeping her feet acceptably small. In addition to reminding audiences that Mulan is still in fact female under her male disguise, these additions are often meant to provide humour even amongst eroticized references.[42]

Even the addition of the surname Hua, which is the Chinese word for flower, is argued to be an erotic and suggestive addition to Mulan between the symbolic imagery and association

---

[38] Xu Wei, "Ci Mulan," in *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, ed. Qian Ma, (New York: University Press of America, 2005): 134; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 66; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 23.
[39] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 131.
[40] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 132.
[41] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 183; Siu Leung Li, *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera,* 85; Xu, "Ci Mulan," 135, 138 -139, 146.
[42] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.

with womanhood, and the repeated references to her looks being "flower-like" teeter between being heterosexual and homoerotic.[43] The erotic aspects of Mulan's femininity was likely for the sake of the literati men that often enjoyed the plays, as opposed to general audiences, due to the likelihood of Xu Wei's play mainly being enjoyed by private upper-class groups, as opposed to the *chuanqi* plays for festivals and general audiences.[44] The use of footbinding as a marker between men and women in the Ming Dynasty added to a historic character like Mulan is quite unusual, as footbinding was not practiced in the time period she is claimed to originate from, further muddling the difference between her nomadic origins and Han adoption.[45] Nonetheless, this is neither the first nor the last time for unique and unprecedented changes in Mulan narratives.

Her female "limitations" are often referenced within the play, such as when she questions why she has to "be a man/to serve [her] father's needs."[46] On the other hand, her capability of succeeding in war like any man is emphasized through her fighting prowess, stating that she is "a girl of beauty/inside the household portal/but who says I'm not a hero/once I'm in the saddle?"[47] While the play follows the original ballad's direction in the first act, the second act demonstrates Mulan's maleness through her military might and makes a case for female heroism.[48] Like the *Ballad of Mulan*, her maleness is not very explicitly referenced to in favour of her femininity, though the *Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place* takes a great deal more time

[43] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 67.
[44] *Chuanqi* is a type of long opera popularized in the Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 71.
[45] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 69.
[46] Xu, "Ci Mulan," 134; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 132.
[47] Xu, "Ci Mulan," 137, 141; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 131.
[48] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 234; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 130-131.

emphasizing Mulan as female, and the achievements that she is able to obtain as a woman or, rather, despite the fact that she is a woman.

In addition to Mulan's return home and her rejection of government positions, gender balance is restored within Xu Wei's play through the necessity of Mulan's actions and the addition of a marriage, as Ming audiences did not consider these stories to have ended until the heroine was properly married off.[49] Upon her return, she is married to Mr. Wang, a virtuous male who will continue the military career that Mulan has left behind. Her femininity is enhanced in a scene in which Mulan is portrayed to be bashful at meeting her new husband for the first time and her mother bemusedly asks how she could be embarrassed when she had just spent twelve years amongst men. Evidently, Mulan never fully transgresses her role as she readily accepts her female role as wife after her discarding her role as a soldier.[50]

Like the ballad, the play ends with the analogy of the rabbits, remarking that "there are many confusing things in the world; this story recounts failure to distinguish sexes."[51] Although *Heroine Mulan Goes to War in Her Father's Place* is more explicit at returning Mulan to her female roles, it also further emphasizes the gender equality that was vaguely hinted at in the original ballad. It is worth noting, however, that the vague critiques of gender roles in Ming society were not meant to address concerns about women's status in Ming society, and were likely for the aforementioned male literati concerns, and is potentially self-referential in nature.[52] Whether this message was interpreted by regular audiences is another important question, but it continues to go unanswered because of the lack of records.

---

[49] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 131-132; Xu, "Ci Mulan," 145, 147; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xviii.
[50] Zou, "Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan," 141; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 71.
[51] Xu, "Ci Mulan," 148.
[52] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 80.

Chapter 4: Mulan in the Qing Dynasty: Anti-Government Discourse, Purity and Suicide Tropes

Portrayals of *Mulan* in the Qing Dynasty build on perceptions of Mulan in the Ming Dynasty and add their own unique additions to the story of Mulan. The Qing Dynasty, reacting to a change in regime emphasized by changes in language, costume and hairstyle, had a noticeable effect on portrayals of Mulan, with new emphases on filial piety and patriotism with ties of ethnicity.[1] While chastity and virtue were still highly emphasized in Mulan, the unique addition of the trope of Mulan's suicide as an expression of her purity and a statement against the unreasonable demands of the government was added.[2] Mulan, during the Qing Dynasty, at least, was the pre-eminent character in narrative discourses of woman warriors that emphasize the sustained popularity of the woman warrior and the Confucian value of filial piety, although Mulan's life is different from that of her Qing audiences.[3]

Portrayals of Mulan during the Qing Dynasty appeared mainly in the form of novels. Zhang Shaoxian, who wrote *Bei wei qishi guixiaolie zhuan* [*The fierce and filial girl from Northern Wei*], portrays Mulan as moral through her Confucian values of loyalty and filial piety, but also through her self-sacrificing nature, as Mulan gives up her marriage to Lu Wanhua, a strategically important person in the enemy camp that Mulan hopes to secure a happy future as first wife to Mulan's husband, in order to secure a surrender from the enemy camp that would help assure a victory for the imperial army.[4] This theme of self-sacrifice and martyrdom is continued in another version of Mulan called *Zhongxiao yonglie qinü zhuan* [*The legendary story*

[1] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xx.
[2] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xx; Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 235; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 185
[3] Edwards (1995), "Woman Warriors and Amazons of the Mid-Qing Texts Jinghua Yuan and Honglou Meng," 226-227.
[4] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 234.

of a girl who is loyal, filial, heroic, and chaste], in which Mulan faces the dilemma of vowing to her parents or following the orders of the emperor. Unable to comply with the demands of the emperor, she kills herself, sends her heart to the emperor and is buried alongside her parents.[5]

Qing Dynasty Novels: *Mulan qinü zhuan* [*Biography of the extraordinary woman Mulan*]

Qing novels about Mulan distinguish themselves in the depth of detail that they can achieve in a single work. In *Biography of the Extraordinary Woman Mulan*, written by an anonymous author and discovered in 1800, depicts a much more spiritual Mulan and includes a history of her ancestors. Zhu Ruoxu, Mulan's grandfather in the story, is responsible for the fostering of Mulan's filial piety as well as her skills, and much of the novel explains his history and the way these skills were passed down. Mulan is believed to have been blessed with prestigious skill, as demonstrated when she visits a monastery as a young child crossdressed and is successfully able to answer all of the head monk's impossible questions, as well showing a quick mastery of staff fighting.[6] Her innate martial skill, civil talents, and innate virtuousness place her well above other characters as she is constantly praised by others for these qualities, which indicates a preference for virtue in Qing society. She is also often seen as concerned for the safety of the public at large, instead of merely her father, and the filial piety that she helps to instill in the army is helping to avoid theft and insubordination. Clearly, the desire for a heroic character in the oppressive Qing Dynasty, and the disdain for corruption in government, shows through the purity and virtuosity of Qing Mulan.

In the novel *Biography of the Extraordinary Woman Mulan*], Mulan straddles the line between male and female easily, as her upbringing encourages both. While she fulfills her

[5] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 235.
[6] Philip Naudus, "The Complete Account of Extraordinary Mulan" http://mulanbook.com/pages/qing/complete-account-f-extraordinary-mulan.

womanly duties at the loom, she also educates herself on philosophical and religious topics, and is trained in archery similar to Manchu practices of the time. Mulan's plan to replace her father at war is accepted because she has been trained and is considered talented in martial arts, and she already successfully crossdressed when she was trained at the monastery. In the army, Mulan quickly rose through the ranks to general, as she was considered talented in military and civil affairs with a well-run military camp free of theft and insubordination, and was "courageous as ten thousand men", although few military battles are described.[7] Despite her generally successful crossdressing, Li Jing recognizes her, but decides to help conceal her identity because of her selfless act.[8] In the end, when Mulan is commended by the Emperor for her victories in war and is offered a military post, she reveals herself to be female and is awarded the title of Princess Wu Zhao.

As well, *Biography of the Extraordinary Woman Mulan* plays on the virtue of suicide during the Qing Dynasty, when suicide is used as a crescendo of anti-imperialism as loyal Mulan is destroyed by the state, and her suicide reveals that the government is unworthy of her sacrifice.[9] The drama of the novel reaches the climax when the Emperor is convinced than a usurper with the surname Wu will remove him from the throne; he is convinced that Mulan is responsible. Mulan attempts to defend herself, but the Emperor does not believe her. In response, she cuts out her heart as proof of her loyalty, but it was already too late for him to change his mind about Mulan. The Emperor mourns, and she is posthumously praised as virtuous. The story is prefaced by corrupt officials preferring profit over virtue, which was likely the most direct way any writer could make such a statement in this period, and Mulan's despair in the final chapter at

[7] Anonymous, "CH. 14" *Mulan qinü zhuan,* (c. 1800.)
[8] Anonymous, "CH. 14" *Mulan qinü zhuan,* (c. 1800.)
[9] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 190.

this accusation is palpable.[10] These strong reactions in response to the unreasonable state are likely statements of Han distaste for Manchu rules and regulations, and hints at the ethnic tensions that existed between the two groups during the Qing Dynasty.

Qing Dynasty depictions continue with the prior tropes of Mulan crossdressing as a solution to an undesirable situation, but with the trope of suicide as a demonstration of female virtue, as both a protection of her chastity, as the Emperor often ends up offering to make her his concubine, and as a subtle rejection of the government.[11] Manchu rule was rejected, notably after the Confucian-styled rulers Kangxi and Qianlong (1711-1799), by ethnic Han due to their lack of regard for Han culture, and using Mulan as a prototype Chinese patriot willing to go to any lengths to serve her father, but reject a corrupt government was a rallying call to women as well after the mid-nineteenth century.[12] Technically speaking, the suicide trope as a rejection of the government was first used in the Yuan Dynasty, but it is in the Qing Dynasty that it is a more consistently applied plot device.[13] Lan Dong argues that the suicide trope is the "tidiest" way to deal with these Amazonian woman warriors and their clash with patriarchal discourse that only sees women as men in times of social need.[14] This may be part of the concern with a crossdressed Mulan, as it has been in preceding adaptations, but the association of suicide with women's virtue is likely the stronger influence, as these versions of Mulan still do not outwardly question gender norms in their crossdressing.

---

[10] Anonymous, "CH. 01" *Mulan qinü zhuan,* (c. 1800.); Anonymous, "CH. 31" *Mulan qinü zhuan,* (c. 1800); Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China*， 63.

[11] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 185-186; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 33, 37-38; Guo Li, "The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men," 32-33, 38; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 24; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 80.

[12] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State,," 194; Edwards (1995), "Woman Warriors and Amazons of the Mid-Qing Texts Jinghua Yuan and Honglou Meng,," 227; Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 12; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 85.

[13] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.

[14] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 84.

Sui Tang yang [*Historical romances of the Sui and Tang*]

The most famous example of novels about Mulan during the Qing Dynasty is the *Historical Romances of the Sui and Tang*. In this novel, the tomboyish Mulan learns martial arts, refuses to marry and goes to war in her father's place.[15] She is described in the novel in a flowery way that feminizes her, but Mulan attempts to save her leader, Henshan Khan, and is captured by the enemy's daughter, Dou Xianniang.[16] Upon finding out that Mulan is a woman, Dou is impressed by Mulan's filial piety and decides to keep Mulan as a personal assistant.[17] Similar to other stories of Mulan in the Qing Dynasty, her parents die while she is away, and the emperor attempts to take her into his harem.[18] In response, she kills herself over her father's grave as a resistant response to the empire, demonstrating her value in this period as a loyal anti-imperialist.[19]

The use of suicide in the Qing Dynasty as the ultimate expression of filial piety is a drastic contrast to the original ballad and previous portrayals of Mulan that prioritized valor and bravery. In *Historical Romances of the Sui and Tang,* Mulan shifts toward being an ideal heroine through her immense virtue, as opposed to just being a dutiful daughter.[20] However, the anti-imperialist characterization of Mulan is quite unique to the Qing; the trope of suicide is eventually dropped from the narrative in the interest of including more uplifting themes. At the end of the nineteenth century, Mulan arises as a national hero for the first time as opposed to just

[15] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 188.
[16] Chu Renhuo, "Historical Romance of Sui and Tang, Chapters 56-61," in *Mulan: Five Version of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010): 119.
[17] Renhuo, "Historical Romance of Sui and Tang, Chapters 56-61," 120; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 186.
[18] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 186; Renhuo, 120; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xx.
[19] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 24.
[20] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 81.

being a filial daughter and good citizen, amidst the tricky rhetoric that comes with determining when China truly becomes a unified nation.[21]

Chapter 5: Mainland Republican-era Mulan: The Modernization of Women and China

Portrayals of Mulan in the twentieth century take an interesting departure from previous periods. Ironically, following the anti-state discourse found in pre-twentieth century narratives, Mulan is further nationalized from the Qing Dynasty portrayal of Mulan, as she is modified into a Han Chinese loyalist who battles barbaric outsiders as part of an allegory for national identity in China in the twentieth century.[1] She is also molded into a model for engagement in public affairs and national modernization in China, and also serves as a beacon for the modernization of women, as women were seen by many reformers to be a primary reason for China's backwardness in the twentieth century, after China's defeat by Japan in 1895.[2] As well, the twentieth century adds the interpretation of Mulan's story as markedly more egalitarian in tone; an unprecedented view that had no place in pre-twentieth century narratives.[3] Interestingly, in some of these versions of *Mulan*, filial piety is sometimes added as an afterthought, as opposed to the main goal.[4] The continuing appeal and relevancy of Mulan to twentieth century audiences is clearly displayed as the original aspects of *Mulan* are removed in favour of more modern concerns, while still retaining the original appeal and message of *Mulan*. While these changes

[21] Jing Li, "Retelling the Story of a Woman in Hua Mulan (*Hua Mulan* 2009): Constructed Chineseness and the Female Voice," *Marvels and Tales* 32, no. 2 (2018): 369.
[1] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xii; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 179-180.
[2] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 194-195; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxiv
[3] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 177.
[4] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxiv.

were made with the intention of using Mulan and her story for their own agendas, it is worth noting that these changes to Mulan's reasons for crossdressing and joining the army were likely necessary, as the political climate of the early twentieth century would have otherwise let Mulan fall into obscurity with the values favoured in the original not as relevant after the fall of the Qing Dynasty.

Films, plays and literature on Mulan in the twentieth century often centered around the wartime culture of 1937-1945. Prior to the breakout of the Sino-Japanese War, political plays were only considered as entertainment for the urban educated minority.[5] They were then subsequently used as powerful propaganda by the Shanghai Theatre Circle National Salvation, whose goals were to rally citizens for the resistance movement against the Japanese and "spread patriotic news to the countryside and the battlefield."[6] Specifically, female symbols were important during wartime China as a cultural tool during a time of national crisis, and were used to imprint a spread of nationalistic and virtuous ideas to emulate.[7]

Film History in China

Before analysing mainland Republican era adaptations of *Mulan*, it is important to note the significance of the introduction of film as a media and industry in China, as the implications of the deliberate use of film go beyond merely just taking advantage of new technology for creating new media: film history in China has much to do with how China grapples with modernity and its own image internationally, as depictions of Chinese in Hollywood were less than desirable in their racist and emasculating portrayals of men, and treacherous, scheming

[5] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 150.
[6] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 150; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 4.
[7] While women were not allowed in the military, they still played supportive roles in the fight against Japan, such as war orphan care, relief, medical care, rebuilding, securing provisions and participating in factory productivity; Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 151-152.

women.[8] Compounded with China's reputation as the "sick man of Asia" and concerns over the dominance of Hollywood in the local film industry, rhetoric in the early twentieth century only intensified with the May Fourth Movement influx of martial arts movies in the 1920s that aimed to portray China as martial and strong once more.[9]

The film industry in China became a method for both the masses and elites to interact with ideas of modernity and culture, which led to their use to transmit ideas and ideologies in an entertaining format.[10] Like the ballads, operas and novels of preceding eras, films were easily manipulated by eager May Fourth reformers, filmmakers and the government alike to transmit their agendas in an accessible mass format.[11] Naturally, with different agents acting sometimes independently of one another, competing versions of modernity emerged as part of a growing urban modernity that was intertwined with consumerism and visual culture.[12] A shared passion for film shaped the modern experience unique to any medium seen in twentieth-century China, in terms of the range and effectiveness of the messages within these adaptations.[13]

Weihong Bao coins two interesting terms that help to describe the experience of the affective qualities of film in this period: vernacular modernism, which helps to explain the relationship between film's give and take relationship with modernity in terms of the global cultural environments and how this translates to the production of a global vernacular of the concept of Chineseness as an ethnicity and as a national culture. In a sense, the way that Chinese culture and the people are portrayed in films in their own local film industry and in

---

[8] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 62; Hanying Wang, "Portrayals of Chinese women's images in Hollywood mainstream films--an analysis of four representative films of different periods," *China Media Research* 9, no. 1 (2013): 75.
[9] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 71; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 270; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 63.
[10] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 21, 90.
[11] Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 64; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 89; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 278.
[12] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* xviii, xxx.
[13] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* xxix.

internationally aimed films from film industries like Hollywood help to shape the concept of China as an entity, especially to those who do not have any other knowledge or sources of information to personally gauge China and its culture. The other term, political modernism, demonstrates the Chinese government's mimetic desires to adapt desired traits from other powerful and influential entities.[14] Together, they explain how film might be used to begin the process of inspiring change in the masses, as well as the educational and cultural capacity of a new media, even amidst criticisms of film being too indirect from their audiences to make a discernable impact.[15]

The twentieth century was a time of tumultuous cultural changes, with the fall of the Qing Dynasty and establishment of the mainland Republican era, the May Fourth Movement, and the social and political upheaval that occurred before the Japanese invasion. Desires for cultural change stem from the national humiliation that came with the signing of Shandong from Germany to Japan, which resulted in moves to eradicate perceived backwardness in Chinese culture, which included so-called superstitious beliefs and other cultural practices, like the binding of breasts and feet.[16] The cultural reshaping and reforming created out of the pressure to modernize varied aspects of society, produced a culture that was recognisable to both the masses and the elites.[17] Film, as Bao argues, engineered a sharable social experience that solidified media institutions and social agents' influence through their involvement, and the ability to

[14] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 19-20, 23-24
[15] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 90; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 5-6, 15, 50-51.
[16] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 24, 29, 221; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 15.
[17] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 22.

influence cultural and even political consciousness at large became quite noticeable by World War II (1937-1945).[18]

While film's capacity for advancing state policy through educational films in the 1920s and as a platform for differing political and cultural debates is demonstrated by the proliferation of such films and the bulk of academic discussion on pre-1949 film focuses on wartime film.[19] With a burgeoning commercial film culture from Shanghai already in existence, films were used to pass messages of resistance about the Japanese occupation as "mass-mediated weapons".[20] As discussed above, propaganda in Chinese media is not a historical anomaly, and it would reasonably be expected to carry on as in previous eras.[21] A strong political consciousness against the invading Japanese was created through the martial heroes of film in the wartime era, one of which was Mulan.[22] Interestingly, Ouyang Yuqian's (1889-1962) *Mulan congjun* [*Mulan joins the army*] (1939) fostered political debate about the production of the film, as radicals perceived the film as collaborationist in nature, which resulted in a public protest that involved burning reels of the film.[23] Regardless of whether or not it was collaborationist, the passion over perceived acts of treason in filmmaking demonstrates the power of film in shaping a collective consciousness of the Chinese people.

As mentioned in the discussion of the knight-errant genre, particularly with the female knight-errants and women warriors of more ancient tradition, the mainland Republican era film

[18] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* xiv; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 6.
[19] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 277-278.
[20] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 267, 311.
[21] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 158.
[22] Kristine Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," in *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s,* eds. Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011): 313.
[23] This film also drew ire for its emphasis on romantic relationships in the film, as it was interpreted as demeaning to the military. Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 1; Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 317-318.

industry featured an influx of films with women more prominent. Both androgynous and "promiscuous" New Women inspired in response to the previous cloistered lives of women prior to this period, and the virtuous heroines that feature in martial films.[24] Cinema created a cultural niche previously unseen in Chinese society as they were increasingly seen as fashionable and unconventional in their lives and relationships with men amidst China's reckoning of new conceptions of body, gender and sexuality.[25] Even as martial women, generally the exception to this niche, were bound to moral codes and notions of duty and sacrifice, there is still room for these films to insert debates over women's status and rights in China through thinly veiled plot devices that incorporate choice in marriage, or at least the ability to delay marriage for the fulfillment of their missions.[26] Women in film were thus part of debate over China's perceived lack of strength, as the so-called inactivity of women in the late Qing and early mainland Republican period was increasingly seen as the reason for the state's lack of strength.[27]

Mulan in the Mainland Republican Era

As plays and films that focused on heroines were popularized, Mulan ended up being one of the most popular characters in wartime dramas. Traditional characters like Mulan were used as they drew more appeal and were more convenient than making entirely new characters.[28] Mulan was considered to be a historical figure that reminded people of China's struggle against invaders, and thus was an effective symbol of resistance to the Chinese public.[29] It was advantageous to portray her as a patriot with her familiar image, as it was necessary to connect to

[24] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 156, 257-258.
[25] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 191; Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 82, 84; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 30, 39.
[26] Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 37, 229.
[27] Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China," 185; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 5.
[28] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 168
[29] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 171.

illiterate peasants without the use of written language.[30] As well, her status as a female warrior was used in China's long tradition of woman warriors in Chinese theatre, portraying her as captivating with the juxtaposition of beauty and military prowess.[31]

However, Mulan and other female warriors were portrayed in an interesting light, with these female warriors having noble ideals and courage, while the males in these plays struggle as they were portrayed to be less talented and resolute, and were often sources of depravity and cruelty.[32] That Mulan was used to attack Confucian values is not surprising in this more progressive portrayal of women warriors.[33] As a result, Mulan became a "cultural palimpsest" that demonstrates past and present aspects of her character over the course of her existence, which includes her history as a nomadic woman warrior, Confucian role model of loyalty and filial piety, exemplar of chastity and as a model for women serving political interests.[34] Tradition and progressivism mixed together in the mainland Republican period as a link between the worlds of historic and modern China.

These versions generally play on the same narrative structure, albeit with different areas of emphasis: the 1927 *Mulan Joins the Army* , for example, features a Mulan who delays her marriage to serve the military in a choice between family and patriotism, and 1928's *Mulan Joins the Army* features a kidnapping scene where Mulan must play along with marrying a girl in her male disguise, but is ultimately married off to her commander at the end of the film, potentially to offset potential homoerotic plotlines.[35] The 1939 *Mulan Joins the Army* features a happy ending scene with the romance of Mulan and Yuandu finally coming to term. There is also a

[30] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 171.
[31] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 171-172.
[32] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 169.
[33] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 170.
[34] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 309.
[35] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 309-312.

trend of depicting her time away from home more prominently in these films, as opposed to the homecoming that was previously emphasized, likely to add extra detail to the film to make it more entertaining.[36] Effectively, through the simultaneous maintaining and subverting of traditional values, women could have it all in films if they spoke, acted and dressed as men, which provided the non-threatening entertainment of characters like Mulan, as seen in prior periods.[37] Without imposing too much on the limits between entertainment and transgression, each version incorporates modern issues of politics and social debates in a familiar and entertaining story, all the while straddling economic concerns that became increasingly important in more contemporary adaptations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In these contexts, Mulan exhibited martial skills, valour, loyalty, charm, grace, and urged women to emulate her in their capacity for action as well as their intellect.[38] These plays also strayed away from the May Fourth ethos of pursuit of romance and individual emancipation in favour of nationalism and collectivism, emphasizing the imperative nature surrounding the national crisis that these writers were speaking against.[39] Drama was evidently used as powerful political and social tools, so this encouragement worked just as well as for previous audiences in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The popularity of martial arts films, and by extension film adaptations of *Mulan*, may also be accounted for by the shift of popularity from *wen* genres which were popular up to the 1920s and 1930s in their restrained and elegant forms of masculinity, to *wu* masculinity, where they could affect audiences collectively with a martial

[36] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 325.
[37] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 326; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 11.
[38] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 161-162.
[39] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 152, 167, 170; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxviii; Iris Ma, "Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China,", 196; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 85.

spirit in cinema where propaganda alone may not properly direct them.[40] These martial arts films were a popular commercial phenomenon that mobilized mass culture with continuing traditions as an articulation of alternative justice that comforted audiences amidst social changes.[41]

Mulan congjun [*Mulan joins the army*] (1903)

Films and operas of the story of *Mulan*, like the plays published in previous time periods, were also created as a part of certain agendas. Mulan still crossdresses in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903) by an anonymous author and Ouyang Yuqian's *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), but her attitude towards doing so becomes decidedly more militant. The opera script of *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903), although technically published in the late Qing Dynasty, fits the nationalist and emancipatory discourses of the early twentieth century. In this film, Mulan is shown to not only demonstrate national loyalty as she urges her cousin Mushu to participate for the welfare of her parents and the family, she scolds him for being a "weakling and good-for-nothing unlike the greatest heroes in China."[42] She laments that she was far too young and not born as a male to be able to participate in the war in her father's stead. In the end, Mulan must go to war because there is no suitable male relative to do so: her cousin Mushu is a greedy, cowardly and somewhat selfish young man who refuses to go to war in place of Mulan's father, and she emasculates him for doing so. It is even Mushu who suggests to her that she crossdress instead of her making the plan, and he temporarily becomes female to add to the ruse in a comedic manner.

The egalitarian discourse of this film shines through when Mulan declares that "[she has] always wanted to join the army and shame those men," and makes such comments on her "all-

[40] *Wu* centered media may have also excelled because of their general themes of dispatching evils and zealots in defense of the innocent. Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 213-214.
[41] Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 57-58.
[42] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army" in *Mulan: Five Version of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010): 34, 36.

overpowering rage" as a female hero and her desire to "slaughter the dragon with [her] bare hands/and achieve merit in this acrobatic performance… as light as a swallow/and beautiful as a flower!"[43] Mulan is often portrayed as quite aggressive in this 1903 film, when she goes on her aforementioned all-overpowering rages, stating desires to "splatter [her] battle gown with blood" and force her male comrades to "deeply bow down before [her] toilette table."[44] Despite her enthusiasm for killing the enemy, she is still quite depressed and anxious to leave her home and female life behind, which seeks to anchor her in her femaleness.

The clash of egalitarianism and crossdressing creates some confusing rhetoric. One must keep in mind that she has made statements that might be interpreted as empowering to a female, but she still must crossdress in order to carry out these actions. The plot begins with a feminized Mulan who has "cheeks like lotus flowers and a waist like a willow", who must shed this female beauty to successfully masquerade as male.[45] The separation of male and female in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903) is made explicit in how Mulan compares the two experiences, as she "abandons/ [her] inner chamber companions/who do embroidery and pick their flowers/ [sic] abandoned the application of rouge and powder,/ … the singing shirt and dancing sleeves/ and the lute with its many strings" in favour of male coded tasks, such as participating in public life and killing for honour and glory.[46] Even in her disguise, she is sometimes suspected of being female and is pursued by characters for her beauty and her suspicious remaining female traits.

Additionally, Mulan still acknowledges that what she does in her cousin's name will not be of her own merit, and that what she does is out of filial piety and not for the personal advancement of female status in China, leaving an albeit weak balance to the egalitarianism

[43] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army," 37, 41, 42.
[44] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army," 46-47.
[45] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army," 41.
[46] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army," 41-42.

present in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903) that is not present in other versions of Mulan.[47] It is not productive to measure versions of *Mulan* in terms of their chronological moves toward progressivism and gender equality as a linear timeline, but it is worth noting that up until this point, Mulan is not as passionate and aggressive in this manner, especially when it comes to shaming the men around her, and the men of China indirectly, for their inaction. While Mulan does not return to female life after her military exploits, her rejection of a military post stemming from her desire only to serve the state and nothing further makes this Mulan one of the first of many versions that has a distinctly patriotic and pro-state attitude.

Ouyang Yuqian's *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939)

Ouyang Yuqian's *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) is one of many films written to dramatize and revive the heroic deeds of Mulan, which is set in the Tang Dynasty. In this film, Ouyang embellishes the story of Mulan in order to fit wartime ideals and contemporary issues in wartime China: anti-Japanese sentiment, loyalty to the nation and filial piety as an extension of loyalty, and themes of traitors and evil ministers within China.[48] In the opening scene, Mulan demonstrates her military superiority over men, as she is better at hunting and outwitting two men who harass her. Mulan's masculinity is further emphasized with her mother's comment of "[wondering] if what [she's] seeing is or isn't a girl," effectively portraying Mulan as a mischievous tomboy.[49] Her tomboy nature is further emphasized as she feels that she may do better in the battlefield than she does as a traditional daughter that, compounded with her father's ill health and her superior martial skill, justifies her crossdressing as she is increasingly portrayed

[47] Anonymous, "Mulan Joins the Army," 38, 46.
[48] Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," 165, 167; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxviii-xxvix; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* xxxii.
[49] Ouyang Yuqian, "Mulan Joins the Army," in *Mulan: Five Version of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010): 59; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 195.

as the perfect person for the job.[50] Her refusal to participate in female tasks may also be an indication of disdain towards previously cloistered females, who were being blamed in this period for the weakness of the nation.

Mulan Joins the Army (1939) begins with Mulan belittling a man for being cowardly, and her status as an exceptionally skilled woman is demonstrated in the display of her marital skill and clever wit. She adopts a male voice and dress for the purpose of disguise, and is somewhat masculine in her steadfastness and loyalty to her parents and the state. While her performance of masculinity is sufficient for her purposes, she is shown to be still female as she falls in love with Yuandu and is noted to be "tender" by her colleagues. Yuandu eventually figures out that she is female and falls in love with her, in a non-transgressive ending for a woman that ties up any loose ends that is common to previous adaptations. Contemporary ideas on love and marriage surface in the resolution of this film, as Mulan cheekily chooses to marry Yuandu instead of the man that her mother has picked out for her, in an uplifting ending that both appeals to tradition and contemporary debates against arranged marriage that surfaced in May Fourth Movement discourse.[51]

Mulan's filial piety is emphasized as she reasons that her father ought to be at home enjoying his old age, and remarks that she is grateful for being taught martial arts, as they allow her to serve the two "perfect goals" of serving the country and filial duty.[52] Her personal conviction of duty to the nation is emphasized by her willingness to accept duty, no matter what hardships lie ahead of her; a patriotic message sent no doubt for viewers to apply to China's

[50] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.
[51] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 316, 317
[52] Yuqian, "Mulan joins the army," 63-64, 67; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxvix.

situation at the time.[53] In this adaptation, Mulan must be a good patriot to be a good daughter, and service to the state becomes entirely compatible with service to family, even as she challenges her father as the ultimate authority in continuing to neglect her feminine duties.[54] The previously antagonistic relationship between the family and state is underscored even further with the film's emphasis on traitors and external enemies, as the general message of the film towards the masses was to focus the efforts of the nation on overthrowing Japanese oppression through its passionate and uplifting discourse.[55]

Mulan's femininity is one of the main focuses throughout the film, as Han and Liu sometimes fantasize about Mulan's strange beauty in the film's complex interplay that calls attention to the apparent femininity that lingers even as she rises through the ranks of the army as part of a male oriented hierarchy.[56] Her fair skin and "feminine air" are often noted by fellow soldiers, and they are left wondering how she was promoted, with the roles of generals being implied they were for more *wu* males, as opposed to effeminate *wen* males. Throughout the course of the film, Mulan finds herself the target of harassment by males both at home and in disguise for opposing unscrupulous males, who manifest in small groups that circle around her either in suspicion or confrontation, serving to remind the viewers that she is still female, even as she does male tasks, such as hunting and participating in the military.[57]

At one point, Mulan and Yuandu must devise a plan to gather intelligence on enemy forces, and the discourse of crossdressing becomes more complex, as Mulan suggests they masquerade as a barbarian couple. Naturally, Mulan is automatically suggested by Yuandu to be

[53] Yuqian, "Mulan joins the army," 64; Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 195.
[54] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 28-29.
[55] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 30.
[56] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 316-317.
[57] Edwards (2016), *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China,* 28.

the wife character, to which she responds that she "would not be very convincing". Yuandu feels otherwise and tells her this and she pretends to be angry at the statement, while smiling in secret. This kind of behaviour demonstrates both the growing relationship between the two soldiers, and her covert, brief expressions of femininity. Mulan flirts with the barbarian soldiers with her feminine charms in order to advance in her (not-so undercover) mission to infiltrate the enemy camp, though this is quickly juxtaposed with her efficient slaying of the soldiers. This interaction reaches its climax towards the end of the film, as Yuandu privately confesses to Mulan that he is aware that she is female, even as he describes their relationship in terms of military ranks, which is a male coded relationship, rather than a heterosexual one. This complex relationship was likely titillating for audiences and reflects the coy interplay of gender and performativity that marks earlier discussions of crossdressed males and females.

Similar to previous versions, this portrayal sends the message of one's ability to accomplish greatness for the nation, regardless of one's gender. Many comparisons are drawn that seek to emphasize skill and virtue over gender, as Mulan is demonstrated to be exceedingly skilled in sword skills and highly virtuous, and other males in the film are generally portrayed poorly, with corruption, laziness and goofiness being amongst the usual traits for the less talented males. Her virtue peaks in juxtaposing her rule as Marshal, where she prohibits immoral activities like pillaging, due to the way the barbarian military is run, as they are seen to brutally sack a city, all the while stealing women and jewels in their wanton destruction and cruelty. As a metaphor for the Japanese invasion, the imagery needed to be sufficiently poignant to achieve its portrayal of patriotism and nationalism, but not so much as to be detected by Japanese censorship, especially with the use of actors as mouth pieces for patriotism and propaganda.[58]

[58] *Mulan Joins the Army* was permitted to pass Japanese censors with the help of Kawakita Nagamata, who sympathized with Chinese interests, but wanted to ensure that the patriotic themes portrayed common values between Japan and China; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a

While this is the last example that uses the story to describe a real group of people, the patriotism of Mulan that even encourages old women and girls to serve the nation only becomes more pronounced, as one enters the communist era and beyond.[59]

Chapter 6: People's Republic-era Adaptations: The Patriotic Mulan and Beyond

Communist adaptations are similar in their occupation with serving the state over the filial bonds to parents and are highly politicized, though this may be in part because of the rejection of tradition and Confucian aspects of Chinese society by the communist leadership.[1] It may be surprising for some, given the direct attack on Confucianism and traditional culture in this era, that versions of *Mulan* were created during the Maoist era. Much like the adaptations during the wartime era, however, Mulan was successfully grafted into the rhetoric as a model woman, amidst the use of mass media to continue to reconstruct the identities of women in Chinese culture.[2] Unsurprisingly, these versions are highly saturated in socio-political discourse, as the CCP realized the potential for film and opera as avenues for propaganda, with the rise of performative politics in the 1960s that prioritize outward expression of political identity.[3]

Following discourse from the May Fourth Movement, the communists in power continued to encourage women to enter public roles and social production as equals to men, as the era for restricting women from the public sphere was part of the many relics of the past that

---

Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937,* 263; Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945,* 1.

[59] Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78; Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 192.

[1] Qian Ma, *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine's Play*, 15.

[2] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 66; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 85.

[3] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 85; Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China,* 212.

they sought to leave behind.[4] Women in the Maoist era (1949-1976), particularly during the Cultural Revolution, were encouraged to leave their feminine identities behind as part of anti-bourgeois rhetoric and a clear preference for masculine women icons as part of women's liberation. Women, in Maoist-era media, were thus often depicted as choosing the CCP and the masses as a way of gaining female identification with the proletarian class that was idealized in communist rhetoric.[5] Iron Girls and female warriors were used effectively as role models through their innate toughness and abilities to bear hardships, which were necessary in Maoist preference for the hardworking peasant and proletarian classes.

Hongse niangzi jun [*The red detachment of women*] (1972), one of the model works by Jiang Qing (1914-1991), exhibits women who perform masculinized political identities as communist warriors. Often armed women in defense of the state were compared to the filial sacrifices of Mulan for her father, which replaced the defense of the father figure with that of the state. In this way, depictions of *Mulan* were created without seeming contradictory in evoking Confucian gender norms and structures, as they were transformed by Maoist and Marxist ideas.[6] Despite the egalitarian rhetoric, female warriors in *The Red Detachment of Women* and versions of Mulan in this period were all in defense of the state to complete the mission of their respective governments.[7] Thus, the Maoist era does not dramatically break away from prior interpretations of a woman warrior.

One Henanese opera, *Hua Mulan,* created in 1956 by Liu Guoquan (1914-1979) and Zhang Xinshi (1916-1984), emphasizes Mulan's role as a moral exemplar. In the communist

[4] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 69-70; Yingjie Guo, "China's Celebrity Mothers: Female Virtues, Patriotism and Social Harmony," in *Celebrity in China,* eds., Elaine Jeffreys and Louise P. Edwards (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010): 46.
[5] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 71.
[6] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 70.
[7] Zhuying Li, "Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972)," 69, 71, 73.

spirit of this period, much emphasis is placed on the importance of women's contributions to the nation, even in roles that were specifically made for women: these contributions were considered as equal to the ones that men contributed in their male-specific role, wherein the authors promote gender equality while maintaining differences in gender roles of women and men as inevitable.[8] Here, Mulan is portrayed as a patriot and advocate of sex equality, and was used for both feminist and political purposes.

Yueh Feng's *Hua Mulan* [*Lady general Hua Mu-Lan*] (1964)

Lady General Hua Mu-Lan, directed by Yueh Feng in 1964, is another twentieth century film that uses Mulan and adapts her to its own agenda, with more communist and patriotic themes that become evident when Mulan says things such as "Who wouldn't enlist themselves?" and "if one's a good soldier, then gender doesn't matter. If one can help out the country, who cares or not if there's a disguise?" This version of Mulan as quite cocky and confident, as when reminded by her mother that she is just a girl, she responds almost jovially, remarking that the other soldiers "might think they are fierce, but to me they are just kittens!"[9] She is also quite opinionated, especially when it comes to issues of morality in the military, as she vocally disagrees with fellow soldiers' desires to find wives in the army, as well as seeking personal glory and riches as their motivation for serving in the army. Similar to *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), Mulan is a staunch patriot that revels in serving the state, and emphasis on filial piety is less pronounced.

Like other versions of *Mulan*, she is portrayed as having great military skill and her ability to adjust to male camaraderie, even if not too enthusiastically when challenged to drink

[8] Edwards (2010), "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State," 202.
[9] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 319.

with her comrades. Expressions of maleness and femaleness in this version are murkier than previous adaptations, with the Maoist preference for masculinized women. Since childhood, she used male disguises, and has an unconventional father-daughter relationship as demonstrated by the father calling for female Mulan to practice with disguised Mulan as simply part of her normal life, which departs from earlier versions that prefer to keep her martial skill a secret, and see it as shameful. Her male performativity is so convincing at times that it is easy for her to be accepted in a brotherhood amongst the soldiers. Even Ming, her cousin, forgets that she is female at times, in his duties to ensure that she remains undiscovered. Her male identity is strongest when the commander offers his daughter in marriage to Mulan, suggesting that her skill and male virtuosity has created a complete illusion.

Even the reason for which her father rejects her plan to replace him in the military is not explicitly because she is female, but because she is young and inexperienced in battle. Prior versions have portrayed Mulan as an exceptional woman, but not in a way that places it on a lower priority of reasons why she ought not to enlist in the military. Mulan even promotes gender equality in asking her father rhetorical questions about men and women's ability to go to war, as they sparred. Defeating him handily and agreeing to her logic, her father allows her to enlist based on her skill and wit. Maoist gender equality is also demonstrated in her scolding Wang about women's "laziness" in their contributions to the war, arguing that they still did housework and supported the army, matching Maoist rhetoric of women as responsible for "holding up half the sky". While all of this is still fulfilling a patriarchal narrative towards the state, *Lady General Hua Mulan* takes greater pains to insert this ideology in the film, even at the risk of seeming historically revisionist.

There are still feminine markers applied to Mulan in *Lady General Hua Mulan*, although they are more subtly implemented than in other adaptations. An interesting stylistic choice in this movie even emphasizes her masculinity in the way that she sings in a lower pitch when around other males, as opposed to singing by herself. She is still made subtly feminine in her attraction to General Li, and in her return to her demure and modest female self after she returns from the war, busying herself to look more attractive when she knows he is coming to visit.[10] Despite this, she is still praised by the other men as the "bravest, incomparable for generations, and treats everyone as her brothers."[11] The mixed messages of gender roles and norms are also classically shifted when Mulan receives a sword as a present from Li, and Mulan gives Li a stylish purse.

It seems that in twentieth century narratives, only one of two narratives is largely present at one time: feminism, or patriotic nationalism. The communist narratives of *Lady General Hua Mulan* and Liu Guoquan and Zhang Xinshi's Henan opera seem to minimize the individual emancipation of women and feminist ideals, while *Mulan Joins the Army* from 1903 and 1939 prefer a more egalitarian interpretation of Mulan. Despite the radicalism of Maoist-era China, its depictions of Mulan more or less remain within the general narrative structure of prior adaptations, differing only in the political agendas that underscore the characterization of the plot and its characters.

The Woman Warrior: Questions of Historical and Cultural Authenticity

One interesting anomaly in the narrative of plays and literature portraying Mulan is Kingston's novel titled *The Woman Warrior*, which was originally published in 1976. The adaptation of Mulan in the second chapter entails a search for self-salvation in becoming a

[10] Harris, "Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s," 321.
[11] *Lady General Hua Mulan*, directed by Yueh Feng (1964; Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers), film.

woman warrior who can defend herself.[12] *The Woman Warrior* also features a narrative of self-possessive feminism that has much to do with her personal empowerment, and is a personal story with a national allegory of a Maoist peasant uprising.[13] In a sense, Kingston used Mulan as a symbol of the oppression that she felt as a Chinese-American woman.[14] This version of *Mulan* is considered to be highly controversial, as it was considered to be Orientalist in nature and was criticized for distorting Chinese and Chinese-American history.[15]

As a result, the "White Tigers" chapter of *The Woman Warrior* is generally excluded as part of Mulan's historical narrative due to its autobiographical nature and its flaunting of both Chinese-American and Chinese cultural traditions, despite extensive scholarship, because of the association of Mulan with "essential" Chinese values.[16] Attacks on *The Woman Warrior* critique autobiographical accuracy, cultural authenticity, and concerns over ethnic representativeness, as the novel is commonly interpreted to be a renegotiating of Kingson's sense of heritage as a Chinese-American in accepting and rejecting cultural memories that were given to her through her parents and through conflicting views of Chinese history.[17] In short, concerns were raised by critics over the depiction of both Chinese and Chinese-Americans, as to uneducated (and to commonly quite disparagingly referenced White audiences) audiences, her autobiography may impart an authenticity that critics reject as part of Chinese identity and culture.[18]

---

[12] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 237.
[13] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 238.
[14] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxxi.
[15] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 229; Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxxii; Yuan Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingson's 'Woman Warrior'," *MELUS* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 199-200; Deborah L. Madsen, "Chinese American Writers of the Real and the Fake: Authenticity and the Twin Traditions of Life Writing," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 261.
[16] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 229-230.
[17] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 236-237, 241; Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," *MELUS* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 3; Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's 'Woman Warrior'," 200.
[18] Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's 'Woman Warrior'," 8; Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," 4.

Kingston and her defenders have attempted to excuse the novel on the basis of artistic individuality, as well as discounting the historical narrative themselves by emphasizing its fictional nature and away from a "true" depiction of Chinese and Chinese-American culture, as it provides half of the basis for opposition to the depiction.[19] However, as a version of *Mulan* that is part of the Chinese-American diaspora that will enter debates as one approaches Disney's *Mulan* and the Chinese responses to them, *The Woman Warrior* must be placed within the chronology of *Mulan* adaptations. Even as it stands apart for most, this kind of narrative is an example of how Mulan can be grafted into the most unconventional of purposes.

The perceived and actual symbolism and rhetoric of "The White Tigers" has been picked apart repeatedly since its publication. The story begins with the author recounting the story of a "no-name aunt," an emblem of the feudal Confucian society that she seeks to counteract by vowing to become a woman warrior, to "get even" with her perception of a Chinese society that felt if women "grew up to be but wives or slaves" they were considered failures.[20] Readers are introduced to Mulan as she is used by Kingston to fulfill her deepest psychological desires of counteracting perceived misogyny in Chinese culture.[21] Mulan is whisked away by two martial arts masters who offer to teach her how to become a warrior, with the motive being getting revenge on thieves who previously stole from her village, as well as the "greedy and fat barons and bandits" she is opposed to.[22] During her training, she is taught to connect with nature as she masters supernatural powers, as well as her emotional and physical weaknesses. In the end, through the use of a magical gourd that allows her to be kept apprised of her family's

[19] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 230; Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," 7.
[20] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976): 19-20; Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," 9.
[21] Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's 'Woman Warrior'," 206; Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," 9, 18.
[22] Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts*, 30.

circumstances, Mulan must save her father once more as she has done in other adaptations. She is given a knight-errant twist in this story, as prior to her departure for battle, she is given painful tattoos on her back as a message to the original Baron who caused her family such suffering, enhancing the narrative of vengeance in this adaptation.[23]

Mulan's status as an exceptional woman is evident here, as even from the beginning, she is respected by others and is seen leading the conscripted men into battle. Mulan faces no restrictions on the battlefield due to her sex, she is not slowed by female markers of menstruation and lactation, or even when she becomes pregnant and gives birth on the battlefield. Even amidst loneliness after sending her child and husband away, she leads the army to victory and proceeds to singlehandedly march the army to oust the emperor. Her female revenge is finally fulfilled at the end of the chapter, when she encounters the Baron that conscripted members of her family. To heighten her female virtue and justify her revenge further, the Baron continues to enrage Mulan with sexist statements that inspired her to become a female warrior in the first place, such as "girls are maggots in the rice" and "it is more profitable to raise geese than girls."[24] When the Baron is not able to understand Mulan's confrontation, she rips off her shirt to show him the tattoos on her back that are meant to carry significance. His eyes trail in shock to her breasts, and she retaliates by decapitating him. In previous versions, Mulans generally do not respond with brutal force in intimate situations, but Kingston's Mulan is an autobiographical version that aims to reassess female subjectivity in an empowering manner, so the extreme violence is meant to confirm her status as a female avenger. On the other hand, her eventual return to domesticity

[23] Allen, "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior," 369-371.
[24] Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts*, 43.

dulls the emancipatory capacity of the story, and no patriarchal themes are challenged as a result.[25]

The Woman Warrior's unusual relationship with communism is an intriguing addition to this adaptation of *Mulan*. While Mao himself does not appear in this chapter, the soldiers march on the emperor bearing red flags, prohibiting theft and rape amongst the ranks, which emulates Maoist doctrine on insurgency. The shocking and unprecedented beheading of the emperor is followed by the appointment of a peasant ruler, and Mulan's execution of the Baron leads to a mass beheading of his family by the beleaguered servants and the tearing down of their ancestral tablets further seeking to destroy old power structures and establish the power of the people, in the iconoclastic style of the Red Guards. Kingston discusses her hatred for the communists as their brutality is part of what Feng Lan describes as a conception of two Chinas: a heroic one that liberates through a communism that inherits Mulan and her legacy, and a demonic one that achieves victory through the slaughtering of innocents that includes members of her own family.[26] To date, Kingston has made no attempt to claim historical accuracy. As well, as Mulan is likely not a real person, and not an ethnic Han, which makes the critics of *The Woman Warrior* accuse Kingston of appropriation of the narrative for her own personal purposes, is a selective targeting based on their personal rejection of this depiction. This theme will be visited once more when entering the discourse surrounding Disney's *Mulan*, as it continues to be debated in light of the 2020 film.

[25] Shu, "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's 'Woman Warrior'," 212; Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 243.
[26] Lan, "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior," 241.

Disney Adaptations and Beyond: Debates of Cultural Appropriation and Chinese Cultural Identity

No analysis of portrayals of Mulan would be complete without discussion of Disney's *Mulan*, initially released in the West in 1998, and recently remade in 2020. Generally speaking, *Mulan* was well received around the world, especially in the West.[27] As part of Disney's initiative to promote the "new woman", Mulan is portrayed as a symbol of girl power and progressiveness, and is described as independent, heroic, strong and courageous.[28] Like many other versions of *Mulan*, Disney's *Mulan* (1998) incorporates young romance as the plot device that ends the story, but the contact between American and Chinese culture has not been well perceived by Chinese scholars and audiences.[29]

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) has been criticized for many reasons. It contains historical and cultural inaccuracies, as seen through the mixture of "Chinese" additions and the decontextualizing, domesticating and universalization of content in the film in an attempt to retain its "Chineseness."[30] Disney's *Mulan* (1998) makes certain changes in the way the story is portrayed in various ways that seem critical to Chinese culture, such as the portrayal of Chinese culture as sexist and backward by allowing Mulan to be forced into the predicament of being required to stand in for her father only by crossdressing, and risking her life in the process.[31] Furthermore, Chinese scholars criticize the film for Americanizing both Mulan and the story with the values that Euro-American fairy tales tend to project and the way that she is portrayed

---

[27] Kwa and Idema, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*, xxxii; Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation,", 862; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 164.
[28] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan,", 54, 68; Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 863; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 187, 190-191; Gwendolyn Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (McFarland, 2013): 115, 124.
[29] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 862-863.
[30] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 863, 865; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 57, 60, 64, 66; Zhang, "Ode to Mulan: Seeing the Animated Film Mulan," 31; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 191
[31] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 60, 61.

as a historic Chinese girl.[32] Disney transforms Mulan's journey from one of filial piety and nationalism to that of self-discovery and actualization, and imports the idea that she is on this journey to form her own individual identity as a Disney princess.[33] As well, Disney's *Mulan* (1998) appears to promote the idea of feminism, although Disney cannot and does not criticize traditional gender roles or alter them in any meaningful way, due to the fact that Disney requires these roles to base its movies upon.[34]

Many of the criticisms that are aimed at Disney's interpretations of *Mulan* address issues of cultural authenticity, as similarly seen with Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, but are made seemingly more severe in its infractions by the fact that Disney is an American company. The reasoning behind this lies in its purported inherent lack of understanding of Chinese culture and history, and the often-cited misappropriations of culture and history in their creations. Most scholarship will simply go along with this rhetoric without stopping to ask several questions: Why are only Americans charged with accusations of appropriation, when every adaptation after the original ballad has conveniently appropriated Mulan and her story for their own agendas? Why are versions of *Mulan* that do not align with the established narrative demonized, despite the acknowledgment of alterations between differing adaptations of the story that match the historical and political context of each writer? Why is Disney criticized for having commercial and economic concerns behind the creation of *Mulan*, despite all film industries needing to

[32] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 863; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 54, 60; Zhang, "Ode to Mulan: Seeing the Animated Film Mulan," 31; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 191, 194; Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 115.

[33] While Mulan herself is not a literal princess in Disney's *Mulan*, the term is applied to her as a catch-all term that generally refers to Disney's heroines. Other notable non-princess heroines include Lilo from *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) and Moana from her self-titled movie released in 2016. Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 191; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 58-59; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.

[34] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 194-195; Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 115, 121, 125; Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," 78.

appeal to customers to continue to release films, especially with an intended audience of children? Furthermore, one must wonder about the claims of historical and cultural accuracy for a character that is most likely neither Han nor a real person. These questions can be answered by parsing concepts of historical memory and presentism as they are seen in Disney films.

Disney: Historical and Cultural Heritage, Presentism and Commercialism

When one is asked to name sources in which accurate historical depictions can be found, a variety of answers may come to mind -- textbooks, scholarly articles, museums and documentaries are some examples of easily accessed repositories of historical fact. Even some Hollywood movies can be considered historically accurate when their limitations and artistic license are considered, such as *Schindler's List* and *Gettysburg*. However, one of the least likely cited sources of historical accuracy is Disney, despite its status as a giant in the film industry and its reputation as an educator. One's instinct may be to argue that this is because Disney is best known for its wide selection of children's movies, but there is more to this question than a dismissal of consideration because of its perceived intended audience. Thus, in order to effectively assess Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan* (2020)'s ability to be considered legitimate versions of Mulan, it is necessary to discuss Disney and its methods of interacting with historical and cultural pasts.

Disney's trend of de-historicizing and stripping its source content for creating culturally and historically palatable products is evident in its many movies and adaptations, and *Mulan* is no exception. The cultural appropriation and historical distortion that occurs within *Mulan* creates an enjoyable movie experience that applauds bravery, individualism and girl power, at the expense of the original Confucian values that ensured the longevity of her character in Chinese culture. Through an analysis of Disney's process of de-historicization and deculturation,

the consequences of its pursuit of "Disney history" and prioritizing of economic success, the mixed reception of *Mulan* demonstrates a conflict between authenticity and presentism that is apparent in many other Disney adaptations.

The titles that have been selected to analyse this conflict include *Pochahontas, Song of the South* and *The Mountie*, as well as a discussion of the historical depictions present in Disney parks. Each will be considered in terms of how Disney has altered and adapted these stories to suit their presentist and progressivist ideals in their historiographies in order to provide an explanation for the historical and cultural distortions that are usually present in Disney adaptations.

History, Public Memory, and Heritage

Before analysing Disney's misuses of history and culture, it is useful to preface it with a discussion of history, public memory and heritage, as it provides some insight into the intentions of Disney as it shapes history and culture for its own ends. In its simplest description, history is conceptualized as a social form of knowledge that is impartial, unchanging and based in fact.[35] As Pierre Nora argues in *Between Memory and History*, history, as it "belongs to everyone and no-one," allows for a claim to universal authority in its objective nature.[36] It is not surprising, then, that historians often orient the study of history from the top down; with "real history" at the top, textbooks in the middle-ground of legitimacy, and amateur historians at the lowest form as "plodding accumulation[s] of inconsequential facts- at worst purveyors of myth" and "condemned to tunnel vision" as succinctly explained by Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of*

[35] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994): 8.
[36] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux des Mémoire," *Representations* no. 26 (Spring 1989): 9.

Memory.[37] It would not be difficult to argue that the status of "historically accurate" of any given interpretation is likely guarded jealously by those who advocate for objectivity.

Memory, on the other hand, is thought of as an active reconstruction of the past, subjected to "emergencies of the moment" and is thus antithetical to the implacable status of history as "past" with its inherent revisionism.[38] Nora goes as far as to argue that history's mission is to "destroy memory", presumably with its empirical and objective nature, in opposition to the subjective nature of selective remembrance of a collective past.[39] However, even popular culture may complicate this seemingly simple definition with the well-known adage of "history being written by the victors." History, as argued by Samuel in *Theatres of Memory*, is also subject to rewriting and reinterpretations as a result of changes in the environment and is subject to erasures and amalgamations.[40] While structuring an argument that claims that history is both unchanging and open to rewrites and reinterpretations may seem self-defeating, it is necessary to address in order to understand the contradictory nature of "Disney history".

Similarly, heritage is a "purposefully selective process of historical recollection" that commodifies the past.[41] It is attributed to a sense of collective memory that explains the origins and development of a certain group, grounded in and informed by a historical past. It is normally a "closed story" that does not allow for subtext, which allows it to be used for celebration as well as mourning.[42] Cultural heritage is popular with the general public as a "tourist spectacle", as it

---

[37] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 4.
[38] Anita Kasabova, "Memory, Memorials and Commemoration," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (Oct 2008): 332; Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux des Mémoire,", 8; Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* x, 6.
[39] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux des Mémoire," 9.
[40] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* x.
[41] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 242-243.
[42] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 243; David Lowenthal, "The Heritage Crusade and its Contradictions," in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, eds. Max Page and Randall Mason (New York: Routledge, 2004): 20.

fosters a sense of nationalism and belonging.[43] It is this aspect of commodification and "spectacle" that is meant to be important here, as it, in addition to the selective way in which history is chosen to be depicted in heritage, is similar to the way that historical events are depicted by Disney. This "selectiveness" comes off as "cultural[ly] sanitizing" in order to present the past as harmless, which leads historians to disparage these depictions of the past for their inauthenticity and "juxtapositions of their ersatz and kitsch to objective inquiry done by higher research".[44] In essence, the perceived willing distortions by Disney towards their target cultures and histories comes off as insincere, as true depictions of cultures and histories would take greater pains to ensure accuracy.

As the word "spectacle" may infer, there is likely some degree in which some historical facts may be selected in order to strengthen a depiction of events, and where some may be removed so as to not contradict the overarching message that such a heritage might convey. This is the general principle on which films based on historical events and persons operate, so as to balance enjoyability of the product and the historical accuracy of what is being depicted. Disney is well known for these deliberate departures from historical pasts; thus, the accusation of "Disneyfying" history appears when the blurring of lines between education and entertainment in edutainment demonstrates a perceived replacement of reality with simulacra.[45] It may even be a misnomer to refer to this blurring of boundaries of history and entertainment, as Disney appears to have created a unique imagined community through its body of shared knowledge that

[43] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 242, 259.
[44] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 260-261, 266.
[45] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* 259; Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 863; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stories of Mulan," 53; Scott Schaffer, "The Past as Product in the Present: Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema*, eds. Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): 33-34; Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996): 135; Souad Belkhyr, "Disney Animation: Global Diffusion and Local Appropriation of Culture," *International Journal of Human Sciences* 9, no. 2 (2012): 706; Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells, "Introduction: Walt's in the Movies," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture,* eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 11.

Michael Dawson argues exists in electronic media as it does through "capitalist print culture".[46] Disney "history", as seen through its various appropriations and adaptations in films more resembles a fabricated heritage, which has led many scholars to argue that Disney is closer to being a "purveyor of myths" than they are willing to acknowledge.[47]

Part of the reason why scholars may find Disney's position problematic is likely due to the influence of "historical" film on the general public as potential repositories of factual authority.[48] There are many such studies on the impact of film on historical understanding, but Karen Bugard's qualitative study on the subject is particularly telling. Intrigued by the effects of historical films on her students' ability to retain and recite certain historical knowledge, the study observes how the participants made connections between the past and present after viewing two separate films concerning the events of Pearl Harbour: *Pearl Harbour* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

Bugard explores the idea that despite the Balkanization of historical events in Hollywood films, historical movies could be used as a method with which students could easily learn about past events they were unfamiliar with, in an entertaining format.[49] After watching both films and being asked to consider the historical "accuracy" of each, students participating in the study noted that after viewing *Tora! Tora! Tora!* the love triangle presented in the film *Pearl Harbour* diminished the historical accuracy, and many of the students argued for a preference for the seemingly more "balanced" perspective in *Tora! Tora! Tora!*[50] When questioned, students also noted that "[the films] didn't go into enough detail of the past. But, [they argued that] a lot of

[46] Michael Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998): 22.
[47] Justyna Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014): 89-90; Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 18. Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory,* 136-137; Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 92
[48] Karen Bugard, "Hollywood and History: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Film as Historical Understanding," (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3394769): 4.
[49] Bugard, "Hollywood and History: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Film as Historical Understanding," 6, 44, 73.
[50] Bugard, "Hollywood and History: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Film as Historical Understanding," 85-86, 97.

movies do that" and that a "grain of salt" is required when watching historical films, because people who are "into history" will know to look for inaccuracies amidst the film industry's "need to please", whereas regular consumers will not.[51] These kinds of comments both outline the limitations of this study and the poignancy of the discussion of historical inaccuracies in Disney films. While these students have been purposely asked to make connections between historical understanding and film, it may not occur to regular consumers to view these films with critical intent, which forms some of the basis of criticisms by both scholars and educators against Disney and its cultivated histories.

Throughout the wealth of studies on Disney and its films lies a common thread of inquiry: the question of the general intent behind Disney's selectiveness of source material, in terms of the aspects that are included and excluded. As Dawson succinctly argues in *The Mountie*, "telling stories means making choices – writing a history means selecting a beginning, middle and an ending as well as selecting 'appropriate' evidence to support the story."[52] In other words, Disney inevitably makes choices of inclusion and exclusion of aspects of the original subject in addition to their original contributions that many scholars take note of in their analyses of Disney films.

Many scholars attribute these deliberate alterations of history and culture to an attempt to maintain a rhetoric of innocence, in order to divorce itself from the perceived negativity of conflict, violence and inequality.[53] Henry Giroux, for example, refers to Disney films as "huggable stories", and suggests that the notion of innocence that Disney represents

[51] Bugard, "Hollywood and History: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Film as Historical Understanding," 85, 89, 112.
[52] Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 18.
[53] Kutsukawa Kiyomi, "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," *AJWS* 6, no. 4 (2000): 44; Alan Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2003): 108; Bell, Haas and Sells, "Introduction: Walt's in the Movies," 11.

"aggressively rewrites the historical and collective identity of the past."[54] This innocence is also articulated as a sanitizing of the original material, which only further suggests that Disney aims to remove "unsanitary" aspects of history and cultures that betray the "clean, happy and industrious" image of Disney, as well as making some concepts and "Others" more palatable and easier for audiences to understand.[55] Giroux argues that criticism against Disney is often suspended by the fact that at its simplest conceptualization, it is a cultural institution that produces content for children, but Kutsukawa Kiyomi suggests that despite the attempts to maintain "innocence" in its products, political messages still exist underneath to assert a specific worldview that pertain to a "White middle-class set of values and privileges."[56]

The aspect of innocence as part of Disney's self-portrayal lends itself to discussion of Disney as an educator and a cultural actor. Disney's narrated stories are argued to be educational in the way that they sell "oughts" in the moral values that Disney films focus around. These stories are meant to teach children about societal roles, while maintaining their historical and cultural authority in drawing from "official" sources.[57] While notions of individualism and personal happiness do not seem inherently harmful to children or society at large, scholars like Giroux argue that Disney's role in spreading commercial and conservative values meant to restructure society and promote social action end up degrading civil society instead, though Brode suggests that educators are also at fault for taking commercial products as educational.[58] The designation of fault, however, is not the point of discussing Disney's implied educational

---

[54] Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 91, 97; Henry A. Giroux, "Memory and Pedagogy in the 'Wonderful World of Disney': Beyond the Politics of Innocence" in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 27.
[55] Bell, Haas and Sells, "Introduction: Walt's in the Movies," 9, 11; Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 77; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 92-93.
[56] Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 95.
[57] Schaffer, "The Past as Product in the Present: Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," 34; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 91, 93; Douglas Brode, "Introduction: Pedagogy, the Pleasure Principle, and American Popular Culture," in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema*, eds. Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): xv.
[58] Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Youth and Violence*, 96; Schaffer, 34; Douglas Brode, "Introduction: Once Upon a Time at the Movies," in *It's the Disney Version!: Popular Cinema and Literary Classics*, ed., Douglas Brode (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): xiv.

goals; the concerns that surround them focus on the way that these aims lead to alterations of history and culture that are perceived as inaccurate or harmful.

One final aspect of Disney films and products that ought to be noted is a more self-serving one: a cultivated nostalgia for American history that explains some of the deliberate exclusions and additions to source material. Nostalgia that is present through the outright or subtle expressions of American values in Disney adaptations and historical depictions is more interested in fulfilling the emotional needs and "fantasies" of its target audiences by appropriating stories and blending past, present and future to create enjoyable films.[59] This is seen through Disney's thematic preference for independence and romance in its films, even if it is not present in the original source.[60] This rewriting of history is often criticized for romanticizing a fabricated nostalgia and conditioning audiences into believing that what is depicted in its "historical" films is accurate, but one must take into consideration that these classics and historical narratives are not often set in stone themselves, and have been altered for respective audiences prior to their Disney counterparts.[61]

Part of what may be considered insidious about Disney historical depictions and adaptations is in the necessity of Disney's economic considerations. Disney is a business, after all, and it should not be surprizing that it must consider what audiences will and will not accept in order to continue producing popular, successful films.[62] One of these perceived potential issues is unfamiliar or unwanted aspects of culture, which are removed or replaced to provide a

[59] Jason Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012): 28; Schaffer, "The Past as Product in the Present: Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," 36; Brode, "Introduction: Once Upon a Time at the Movies", xiii; Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 108-109.
[60] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 75.
[61] Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 109; Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*, 27-28; Brode, "Introduction: Pedagogy, the Pleasure Principle, and American Popular Culture," xiii; Giroux (1995), 27.
[62] Brode, "Introduction: Pedagogy, the Pleasure Principle, and American Popular Culture," xiii; Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 110.

familiar ideology in an "exotic package".[63] While the adaptation of folk tales and history are part of a tradition established by Walt Disney (1901-1966), the stripping of history and culture in its efforts to simplify and commodify them sometimes leads to mixed receptions at best.[64] Criticisms against these efforts not only lament the stripping and rewriting of histories but also the loss of cultural distinction as accuracy for Disney is "uneconomical…[and] unnecessary," as argued by Peng.[65] However, it is important to note that Disney's approach to the past is generally to improve it, and their "retrospective tidying up" is explained by Mike Wallace as not an abuse of the past, but as capturing the "essence" of a period.[66] Whether or not this is always the case will be examined through an analysis of the historiography surrounding different Disney adaptations.

Disney Parks: Idealized Depictions of American Society

One of the most scrutinized aspects of Disney is the historical attractions featured in Disney Parks, as they are examples of the way Disney tends to strip and distort history. Main Street, an idealized depiction of American society at the turn of the century, elects to downplay and neglect negative aspects of history such as slavery, the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights movement in order to provide a positive, nostalgic and almost mythological experience as consumers explore Main Street.[67] These exclusions project an image of American

---

[63] Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 178; Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 99; Mingwu Xu and Chuanmao Tian, "Cultural Deformations and Reformulations: A Case Study of Disney's Mulan in English and Chinese," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 2 (April 1 2013): 199; Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 863, 865; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Youth and Violence,* 108.

[64] Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 189; Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 29; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Youth and Violence*, 109; Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 89-90; Xu and Tian, "Cultural Deformations and Reformulations: A Case Study of Disney's Mulan in English and Chinese," 205.

[65] Shao Peng, "Analysis of Mulan's Selling Points and Marketing Operations," *Chinese Anthropology and Sociology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 12; Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 190.

[66] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory,* 136-137.

[67] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory,* 137, 149, 152-153; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 95; Kiyomi, "Disney's Pochahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," 46; Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 100, 110.

history that simultaneously does not contain poverty, class difference and urban decay, but also has a presentist view of American society that asserts that such negative issues are in the past, if they are allowed to be acknowledged at all.[68] Wallace describes this as a "selective amnesia" in their efforts to match a "happy present" with a "happy past", which he suggests is a "cultivated nostalgia for a fabricated past."[69]

There is also a considerable progressivist, pro-corporation sentiment that exists through the way Disney chooses to depict history in these parks. Attractions that pertain to the history of science and technology use the common Disney tools of humour and omissions to suggest that all previous inventions and innovations of the day are bound to be superseded by subsequent superior ones due to the efforts of corporations to better American lives.[70] Alan Bryman argues that their humorous portrayals of "inefficient" technologies like bicycles and horse-drawn carts as the cause of mundane chaos effectively draws attention away from current issues of the day, which suggests that these "primitive" technologies are easily dismantled "non-issues" that are easily overcome by present knowledge, which lends itself to Disney's presentism.[71]

When societal issues are portrayed in Disney attractions, they are often done in a way that simultaneously applauds progress and sidesteps or neglects past and present issues. The film *Symbiosis*, for example, graphically represents the ecological damage that is caused by industry, but provides a corporate solution in an optimistic light, which draws attention away from the fact that the issue would not exist without corporations.[72] Wallace explains this by noting that professionals and managers were common visitors to the historical displays, which he argues is

[68] Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 108.
[69] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory,* 137.
[70] Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 100-101.
[71] Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 101.
[72] Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 101-102, 105.

indicative of an interest in addressing the past under these "comfortable stereotypes".[73] This aspect of comfortable stereotypes connects to the "cultivated nostalgia" that Disney has built within its attractions, and will be seen again in films like *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*.

Racial issues are similarly minimized in a variety of areas of Disney attractions. "It's a Small World After All!", as argued by Kiyomi, embodies an ideology of ethnic harmony. However, she notes that this "harmonious" world that encompasses different ethnicities, cultures, religions and attitudes cannot exist without Disney silencing and erasing history, as well as the conflicts that have happened between the represented groups.[74] The feature of a Chinese doll in a Maoist uniform next to a Japanese doll in its kimono, for example, ignores the violent racialized history that took place during WWII, as well as the depiction of a Mountie with a friendly raven that symbolizes the Canadian Indigenous population similarly makes no note of the conflict and violence that takes place between these two groups.[75] While the juxtaposition of the Chinese and Japanese dolls was later altered, the attraction demonstrates a willingness to extricate materials to promote this "happy" ideology out of its historical context. Bryman also notes that Disney's usage of animatronics of important leaders without discussing the politics and history that would otherwise explain their importance causes "authenticity of the surface appearance of the attractions [to] usefully [sic] conceal the inauthenticity of the message that underpins them", which he argues hides the distortions of history and makes them more palatable to consumers.[76]

---

[73] Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory,* 153-154.
[74] Kiyomi, "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," 43.
[75] Kiyomi, "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," 44; Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 146.
[76] Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds,* 103-105, 111.

Disney's Mountie: Rewriting of Historical Imagery

While most studies of Disney adaptations inevitably discuss an overall negative public and scholarly response, this is not entirely the case for Disney's acquisition of the Mountie, as discussed in Dawson's *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney*. Prior to the Disney purchase of the image and likeness of the Mountie, two different stories of the RCMP were present: one described the story of brave men overcoming adversity to build Canada as a nation, while the other is a story of repression and intimidation of minorities and leftists. The reinvention that excludes conflict and racism in favour of "family values" made the Mountie an ideal acquisition for Disney, which is evident in Disney's subsequent use of the stereotyped calm and non-violent Mountie as part of a comfortable and marketable narrative.[77] The prior dual narrative still exists, but only the story that describes the adversity is now visible in Canadian heritage as it is taught in curriculum and portrayed as part of public discourse, as Dawson argues that it is more comfortable to Canadian society.[78]

Dawson argues that Disney's offer to purchase the Mountie produced rhetoric about the "ownership" of the Mountie until 2010, when the Mounties took back their image, and whether or not a national police force has any legal control over its own image. Issues that were discussed amongst the Canadian public were mixed - some felt that it was a sellout and a method of the US to cut Canadians out of their profit from the Mountie, while others felt that this purchase was long overdue.[79] As an important national symbol, it was agreed upon that the most important issue was the Canadian responsibility to maintain a good Mountie image as part of Canadian heritage, but this debate over business interest overshadowed the debate over the actual image

[77] Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 2, 164, 170-172
[78] Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 18-20.
[79] Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 2.

itself, which is markedly similar to how Disney prioritized profitability and its public agenda over the actual cultural and historical sources that it borrows from.[80]

Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995)

Another example of the historical distortions that are commonly attributed to Disney can be found in *Pocahontas*, an animated film that was released in 1995. As one of the first films made by Disney that featured a non-European main character, it was initially lauded for its progressivism and was popular with the public.[81] However, it was eventually criticized for its inaccuracies. To begin, the fact that the version of the story that is told in *Pocahontas* relies on the account that John Smith wrote suggests a Eurocentrism that Russell-Cook argues commodifies Pocahontas as an "impassioned depiction of imagined indigenes."[82] Russell-Cook also argues that *Pocahontas* displays a cultural assimilation in which so-called negative aspects of Native American culture are scrutinized and replaced with superior ones, through her depiction as an independent, rebellious young woman with a supermodel body.[83] The incorporation of ecological concerns as a perceived aspect of Native American spirituality comes off as what Justyna Fruzińska argues to be "new-Age type gibberish" that ideologically sabotages and stereotypes Indigenous cultures to promote American ideology.[84]

Similarly, Fruzińska argues that in a choice between historical accuracy and social responsibility, Disney chose a portrayal of Pocahontas as an independent character who disregards her community and follows her own desires as a "desirable" way to express American

[80] Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney,* 4.
[81] Kiyomi, "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," 47; Myles Russell-Cook, "Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human," in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema*, eds., Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): 103.
[82] Russell-Cook, "Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human," 103-104.
[83] Russell-Cook, "Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human," 105-106; Giroux (1996), *Fugitives of Culture: Race, Violence and Youth*, 103.
[84] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 75, 87; Russell-Cook, "Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human," 105.

ideals.[85] Disney's assertions that their intent was to treat Pocahontas and Indigenous culture with respect falls short in light of this assimilation, Jackson and Edgerton argue, as the minimalization of important issues surrounding European-Native American relations in favour of actually addressing them made *Pocahontas* a great commercial success, but a bad historical revision.[86]

As an alternative to acknowledging the brutal history of racism, colonialism, environmentalism and spiritual alienation that exists in more historical accounts of Pochahontas, the Disney version noticeably focuses more on Pochahontas' depiction as an individual through the plot of romance, as part of a Disney trend that generally prefers happier and less complex narratives. Giroux argues that this sort of Pochahontas portrayal "bleaches colonialism of its genocidal legacy" as the disease, devastation, land abuse and destruction of the Indigenous way of life that looms behind regular depictions of contact between Europeans and Indigenous populations is not depicted.[87] Scholars who analyse *Pochahontas* also generally note that John Smith and Pochahontas were not originally lovers, so this rebellious romantic plot sets aside an original historical version of the story of Pochahontas leaving for England with John Rolfe, changing her name to Rebecca and dying young overseas.[88] Kiyomi argues that this difficult narrative is not sufficient for Disney as it speaks to an assimilation of savagery. While it is a far cry from the "savagery" depicted in movies like *Peter Pan,* it is enough for some scholars to render the depiction as beyond recognition in Disney's tendency to "kill history for the sake of ideology."[89] While it is more likely that these considerations towards the plot were made for the

[85] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 89.
[86] Kathy Merlock Jackson and Gary Edgerton, "Pochahontas as a Disney Princess: History, Legend, Literature and Movie Mythology," in *It's the Disney Version!: Popular Cinema and Literary Classics*, ed., Douglas Brode (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016): 190-194.
[87] Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth,* 104.
[88] Kiyomi, "Disney's Pochahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," 58, 62; Jackson and Edgerton, "Pochahontas as a Disney Princess: History, Legend, Literature and Movie Mythology," 192-193; Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 87.

[89] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 89.

sake of profitability, the perspective of Disney as an unabashed rewriter of history needs to be considered as part of the rhetoric surrounding Disney's version of Mulan's story.

Song of the South: The Writing of an Unproblematic Historical Past

Song of the South (1946), one of Disney's most notorious movies, is another example of Disney disregarding historical issues in order to create a film that reflects Disney's depictions of unproblematic historical pasts. *Song of the South*, as argued by Sperb and Giroux, is a racially charged "cinematic relic from a past with no shortage of anachronistic and offensive depictions."[90] The African-Americans depicted in this film are "happy campers" who are content with their lot in life on the plantation in this racially harmonic utopia.[91] Similar to *Pochahontas* and *The Mountie*, stereotypical characters, such as Uncle Tom and the mammy, are used to further instill the depiction of African-Americans as subservient, dependent and passive.[92] Sperb argues that *Song of the South* serves a reactionary nostalgia that White audiences would find simplistically reassuring during the racial upheavals of the twentieth century; a reoccurring theme that is found throughout Disney's historical and cultural adaptations.[93] Furthermore, Sperb states that the "colour-blind" friendship between a White boy and a poor African-American man ignores and possibly reinforces cultural, economic and racial hierarchies due to the fact that the movie is not based in any historical context.[94] The utopian nature of this film effectively pays no attention to the violence that accompanied the maintenance of slavery of African-Americans, and

[90] Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South,* 1; Giroux (1996), *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, 104-105.
[91] Susan Miller and Greg Rode, "The Movie You See, The Movie You Don't: How Disney Do's That Old Time Derision," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, eds., Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 44; Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South,* 1, 10-12.
[92] Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South,* 11-12.
[93] Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South,* 10, 12-13, 19, 28-29.
[94] Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South,* 19.

is thus a prime example of the way Disney's popular culture narrative of unproblematic, happy pasts changing the way history and culture are depicted in Disney films.

Disney's *Mulan* (1998): International Acclaim and Chinese Academic Vitriol

Thus far, through examples within Disney's attractions and their feature films, a general trend of popular culture dictating the way objective history is written by Disney has been established. This method of writing used by Disney perpetuates an ideal product that provides enough historical connections to the past so as to foster some sense of historical understanding and authority, as Bugard defines in her study, while ensuring the enjoyability of the films and attractions in the promotion of a sufficiently presentist view. Disney's *Mulan* undergoes the same kinds of revisions and alterations, in order to render it economically and culturally successful for both its Chinese and international audiences. While Mulan is likely not a real historical figure, the historic criticisms suggests this is inconsequential through the arguments that a presentist view was established in *Mulan*. Similar departures from the official narrative have been present in the narrative with every adaptation after Disney's *Mulan*, though it is argued that Disney creates a more progressivist and internationally palatable Mulan for popular consumption.

Similar to *The Mountie*, Mulan has also been subjected to some changes throughout the course of time that align to different Chinese interests; mainly, that the transition between the anti-empire criticisms within the original ballad from unreasonable demands of the state on its people to Mulan as an expression of nationalist duty, is a radical change. The cultural, bordering on historical, pervasiveness of *Mulan* can be seen through the mandatory memorization of the original ballad as early as primary school.[95] All subsequent versions of *Mulan* rely on a basic

[95] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 865.

formula of Confucian filial piety and patriotism demonstrated through Mulan's sacrifice for her father, and variations see some changes in terms of the cultural, historical and political contexts of their authors.[96] However, it is only the Disney interpretation that has drawn the level of ire that is visible within the historiography surrounding it, with the general criticism being an inauthenticity and Americanization that led to a purported initial poor reception of *Mulan* by mainland Chinese.[97]

The critical acclaim surrounding *Mulan* (1998) around the time of its release was somewhat mixed. While some praised this version of Mulan as a modest heroine that is "no Barbie doll" and an outstanding "plucky" female role model for female empowerment "as close to feminism as Disney gets," others note issues in all aspects of the movie.[98] Heavy-handed messages, stereotypical portrayals of Huns, culture clashes and even (deliberately) poor timing of showings in China, likely a result of deliberate manipulation by the CCP, explain the lack of impressiveness of *Mulan* (1998), as well as comments that highlight earlier concerns of the Americanizing of Chinese cultural narratives that were made about *The Woman Warrior* returned to the rhetoric in these reviews.[99] Certainly, there were hopes that the use of Mulan would be enough to bridge the gap between China and the U.S. with *Kundun* (1997) nearly causing an international incident and with the sales of *Titanic* encouraging filmmakers to chase lucrative

---

[96] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 189; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 66-68.
[97] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 864-865, 872; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 64; Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 120; Jing Li, "Retelling the Story of a Woman in Hua Mulan (*Hua Mulan* 2009): Constructed Chineseness and the Female Voice,", 362.
[98] Bob Smithouser, review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Pluggedin, https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/mulan/; Ian Treer, review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, *Empire* (January 1, 2000) https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/mulan-review/.
[99] Frank Langfitt, review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, The Baltimore Sun (May 3, 1999); BBC News, "Chinese Unimpressed with Disney's Mulan," (March 19, 1999) https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1999-05-03-9905030250-story.html; Janet Maslin, review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, The New York Times (June 19, 1998); Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 170-171. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/19/movies/film-review-a-warrior-she-takes-on-huns-and-stereotypes.html.

profits from Chinese audiences.[100] However, even contemporaries and reviewers were willing to admit that this would not be likely, given Chinese wariness of depictions of themselves from others, and the screening process for foreign films in China proved to be quite intertwined with the politics that still rejected American friendship.[101] It is worth noting that in recent years, Disney's *Mulan*'s Douban page boasts a 7.9/10 score amidst a mixture of high praise and lukewarm reviews, making the determination of this adaptation as a success or failure more complicated than is argued in much of contemporary scholarship.[102]

Analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (1998)

Along with the basic themes and setting of the movie, Mulan herself is changed in a way that is perceived as negative by Chinese scholars. She is transformed into a rebellious, clumsy and awkward teenage girl that has next to no military prowess.[103] Her rebelliousness is a very clear departure from previous versions of *Mulan*, as she cuts off her hair to impersonate as a man and runs away from home, as opposed to begrudgingly obtaining permission from her parents to go to war in her father's place, which further strips the original meaning of *Mulan*.[104] It is not surprising that Chinese scholars prefer to exclude Disney's *Mulan* (1998) as a legitimate version of classical Mulan. The classic Mulan acted from duty, did not struggle with being a "good daughter," was always dutiful, and did not need to separate herself as an individual from her fellow soldiers and the rest of society.[105]

---

[100] Michael Fleeman, "Hollywood Hopes More Movies Follow Clinton to China," *World Tibet Network News* (July 12, 1998) https://web.archive.org/web/20110705114829/http://www.tibet.ca/en/newsroom/wtn/archive/old?y=1998&m=7&p=12_2; Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 171.
[101] Langfitt, review of *Mulan*; Fleeman "Hollywood Hopes More Movies Follow Clinton to China."
[102] Rita Hsiao et al., "Mulan (1998)," June 19, 1998, https://movie.douban.com/subject/1294833//.
[103] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 867; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 57; Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 191; Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 116.
[104] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 67.
[105] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 66-68.

Disney's Mulan (1998) is also unique in the way that she resists both being female and male. While this adaptation contains the disruption that occurs when women become men, it also emphasizes the processes of feminization and masculinization in certain aspects of the film.[106] In order to become brides and thus successful women in Mulan's society, all women needed to submit to feminization, as seen by the fabled match-making process in the opening sequence of the film. Mulan resists this in her discomfort at having her hair styled, different clothes put on and makeup applied. As well, Mulan resists becoming male by remarking that the men were "gross", violent and overly sexual, as seen by Mulan's suggestion that she'd "like a girl with a brain who always speaks her mind." The difference between being male and female in Disney's *Mulan* (1998) is over-stated in the idea that a woman's body is not her own, while a man is required to maintain physical self-awareness, meaning that it was up to Mulan to "make herself a man."[107]

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) clearly portrays a crisis of self and individuality as well as a lighthearted dialogue on gender inequalities as displayed in the film. Mulan is portrayed to be more creative and original in the way that she solves her problems, as seen by the way she does her morning chores and her ability to solve board games at a quick glance. This imparts a sense of "uniqueness" of Mulan's character that is not highly emphasized in any other version of Mulan. As well, Mulan's inability to conform to societal norms is clear, with the analogy of Mulan as a "late bloomer" whose true self would "break her family's heart." This sets up a crisis of the individual that peaks when she is discovered to be a woman shortly after her victory against the Huns, when she questions her own competence and goals because of her perceived

[106] Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 116
[107] Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 120-121.

failure, stating that "maybe I went to prove that I could do what's right, so that when I'd look in the mirror, I'd see something worthwhile."[108]

Her conflict in terms of gender is also visible in the song "Reflection," where removal of her makeup as an allegory for her "femininity" to reveal her true self, since she cannot be a perfect bride and herself at the same time.[109] The dialogue on gender inequality and sexism is very clear throughout the film, with the establishment of impersonating a soldier as high treason, and Mu Shu's comically cruel offhand comment that no one is listening to her "because you're a girl, remember?" Much like previous versions, however, one does not see a forfeiting of femininity even as she is shown to be successful in military matters in and outside of the disguise, as a nonthreatening tomboyism that occurs within boundaries.[110] If the film merely ended here, it could be claimed as a clear example of a truly feminist Mulan, but she returns to her domestic life with her family with an implied marriage to Shang, which can be interpreted both as faithfulness to the original ballad and a retreat of Disney's own feminist twist to a classic tale.

Disney's *Mulan* (1998)'s take on crossdressing is quite different from Chinese versions of the original story. While the use of crossdressing is quite necessary for its transmission as a version of *Mulan,* it is one of the only versions that imposes a fatal consequence for her crossdressing being revealed, as opposed to ambiguous threats to her chastity being the main impetus for keeping her sex concealed.[111] There is also a notable air of a comical take on male crossdressing, as seen by the scene where Yao, Chien-Po and Ling impersonate concubines to

[108] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 867; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 59.
[109] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 60.
[110] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 177-179.
[111] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 180.

fool the guards keeping them from the emperor, with the fairly dimwitted guards noting their presence as “ugly concubines”. This conflation of Mulan’s heroic crossdressing with the distracting crossdressing could be taken any number of ways, including that of a derisive tone towards Chinese men who could only be ugly dressed this way, but as the film is intended for a young audience, the plot device was likely primarily a lighthearted joke to ease the tense action in the film. While no Chinese film would take this manner in such a way, even in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903), where crossdressing is used to excuse cousin Mushu from military service in a mocking manner, it is worth noting that despite Disney’s pledges to cultural and historical relevancy in the film, they are still under no oath to do so as any of the other adaptations have not been, and thus they can be considered a part of the legacy of *Mulan*.

In general, Disney’s *Mulan* (1998) is clearly incongruent with previous versions of Mulan, with its own flaws and mistakes, but it is still an enjoyable and successful film that received a sequel in 2005, and a remake in 2020. It must be noted that this film was intended for an audience of young children, so not all of the themes shown in the original and previous versions of *Mulan* can be fully explored, such as the concerns over her chastity, and the brutality of war. In this adaptation, much of the violence that occurs in war is minimalized, and most of the casualties are indirect or implied in favour of focusing on the personal development of Mulan as a woman and as a soldier. However, its appeal and success in the West cannot allow for this version of *Mulan* to be simply ignored as a historically and culturally inaccurate “mistake.” What can account for the continued rejection of *Mulan* (1998), and the renewed debate towards *Mulan* (2020)?

Chinese and Western Historiography Surrounding Disney's *Mulan* (1998)

The non-Chinese historiography often discusses the strengths and potential inaccuracies differently than Chinese historiography does. Instead, non-Chinese scholarship surrounding *Mulan* mainly addresses the dominance of American values over Chinese values and the individualist and feminist rhetoric that is often present within the Disney Princess line. Gwendolyn Limbach argues that Mulan is part of a line of rebellious, outspoken female characters that she calls "Disney's New Woman", which contradicts the original obedient nature of Mulan as seen in the original ballad.[112] Limbach notes some Americanizing traits in addition to the overall changes to Mulan's personality and impetus for joining the military, such as Mulan copying notes onto her forearm like a modern teenager, and the inclusion of feminist sentiment. As well, she argues that the fact that Mulan runs away from home instead of being sent off to war with permission diminishes the original filial piety present, which in its deculturation suggests a presentist point of view that effectively removes aspects of the original ballad.[113]

Similarly, Fruzińska argues that *Mulan* prominently features the notion of individualism throughout the film, so as to provide a more relatable product to the general American public. As a whole, Disney heroes tend to have issues entering social roles like Mulan does, which Fruzińska argues is demonstrated as she fails to become a perfect bride or a good soldier. This enables Disney to impart a positive attitude towards individuality, despite the fact that Mulan originates from a collectivist society.[114] She also notes the way Disney masks American individualism in *Mulan,* in quoting that "a single grain of rice may tip the scale", suggesting that this phrase would otherwise appear to be a Chinese maxim, which may otherwise have gone

[112] Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 115.
[113] Limbach, "'You the Man, Well, Sorta': Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan," 115-116, 125; Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 66-67.
[114] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 31, 76, 118.

unnoticed by consumers.[115] Like Pochahontas, Mulan's individualist and rebellious nature overwrites inferior traits that would lead to unhappy endings, which would be an undesirable result in Disney's pursuit of "happy pasts and presents". Instead, her unconventional feminine strategies further promote the idea of individualism, as well as feminist ideas which lend themselves to Disney's presentist attitudes, as she is congratulated for using her expertise as a woman to solve problems in a unique way.[116] The original ballad, in contrast, makes very scant references to Mulan as a woman, instead preferring to comment on filial piety as the ultimate virtue. While American audiences should not be expected to relate to such sentiments, this line of thinking is disregarded entirely in Disney's *Mulan,* which may lead some to suggest that the film is disrespectful towards Chinese culture and history to some degree.[117]

There are naturally those who have nothing but praise for *Mulan* (1998)'s breaking away from previous paradigms of female heroines, as well as producing progressive change in having the Emperor offer Mulan a council seat despite knowing she is a woman, and her own patriarchal father casting aside his earlier preconceptions of Confucian morality to honour her as a daughter and as a continuity of inner and outer expression that does not require sacrificing her gender or her role in life.[118] The feminist rhetoric of the film is praised as Mulan is a "rare heroine" in a "coming of age story about a woman finding and learning to wield her own power" as compared to other Disney heroines, who often need to be rescued by heroic males instead of dispensing their own justice.[119] As well, Disney's choice of selecting minority cultures and their

[115] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 112.
[116] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 117, 120.
[117] Fruzińska, *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films,* 120; Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 864.
[118] Brocklebank, "Disney's 'Mulan': the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" 276, 278, 280; Michelle Law, "Getting Down to Business: "Mulan" and Disney's Evolving Progressivism," *Screen Education* 12, no. 91 (2018): 17.
[119] Law, "Getting Down to Business: "Mulan" and Disney's Evolving Progressivism," 18

mythologies was seen by some as a genuine effort that contributes to the contemporary narrative that values diversity in film.[120]

There are also unabashedly negative non-Chinese scholarly reviews of the film, stating that the depiction is an "(ab)use of beloved folktales" in its discarding of cultural authenticity in favour of financially viable entertainment, which according to Joseph Giunta all but guaranteed that the film would not be received well in China.[121] Amidst the claims for Disney's desire to promote cultural authenticity through research, it seems easy to pin the blame solely on the commercial nature of Disney as a company, and the lack of care that is put into creating a culturally authentic product.[122] These arguments, however, do not account for the multiple interviews with *Mulan* (1998)'s director Tony Bancroft (b. 1967) that demonstrate care and appreciation for the borrowed Chinese culture, and an attentiveness towards maintaining cultural accuracy. In her article on the "embedded coloniality" of *Mulan* (1998) and *Moana* (2016), Michelle Anya Anjirbag claims that Disney wields a power dynamic in which it tells stories not by cultural exchange but merely by transmission, after it has adapted them into the status quo in an "ethnic seasoning", suggesting that a binary of White and non-White characters creates a hegemony of universal white tropes that are expected to be universally understood, even within films depicting other cultures.[123] This "Orientalizing" and othering of minority cultures, in addition to a lack of effort by Disney to make authentic products, would suggest an attitude that views the borrowing culture as less important than its own.[124] However, interviews in which

[120] Law, "Getting Down to Business: "Mulan" and Disney's Evolving Progressivism," 17-18; Michelle Anya Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana: Embedded Cultural Coloniality and the Search for Authenticity in Disney Animated Film," *Soc Sci* 7, no. 203 (2018): 88.
[121] Joseph Giunta, "'A Girl Worth Fighting For': Transculturation, Remediation, and Cultural Authenticity in Adaptations of the Ballad of Mulan," *SARE* 55, no. 2 (2018): 155-156, 158.
[122] Dong (2006), "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan," 220.
[123] Anjirbag, "Mulan and Moana: Embedded Cultural Coloniality and the Search for Authenticity in Disney Animated Film," 90-91; Wei Djao, "Opinion Status as Ethnic Identity in the Chinese Diaspora," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32, no. 3 (2002): 363.
[124] Dong (2006), "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan," 226-227, 229.

director Tony Bancroft provides insight into making *Mulan* (1998) seem to contradict this, as he reflects on his intended vision for the film,

> It was a matter of pride. We knew we were Westerners telling a very ancient and Chinese story. A story that was really important to China – this is like their Paul Bunyan, like what Paul Bunyan is to the US, even more so Mulan is to China. I mean that's their kind of a national treasure or a story that kids are brought up with over the years, thousands of years. To tell you the truth, she goes back over two thousand years, so for us we knew that we had to get it right. And getting it right meant that, like I said, deep diving into the culture or history, making sure that even props in the scene were accurate.[125]

It is thus not so easy to simply demonize Disney for their depictions of Mulan. Though he inaccurately pins Mulan's history as stretching back over thousands of years, the acknowledgment of the cultural and historical legacy by Bancroft is evident in the interview. Over the course of the interview, Bancroft repeatedly expresses a desire for cultural relevance, and makes note of the removal of the scene where Mulan kisses her father goodbye as he sleeps, as an acknowledged Western sensibility that would not fit in a Chinese story, stating that "[they] did not want to change this story into what [they] thought it should be." The appeal for Bancroft was in creating a positive female role model for his own daughters, as well as others', particularly as a Chinese role model. Evidently, it is not as easy as one might assume to pin the blame on Disney counting on international acceptance of the film to drown out negative criticisms, as failure to recreate the story in a way that the Chinese would enjoy does not necessarily confer intent.

Chinese historiography surrounding *Mulan* is similar in its critiques of the inappropriate inclusion of American values like individualism and feminism, but generally analyses of the historical and cultural inaccuracies present in the film are central to their discussions, as well as

[125] Paul Bunyan is a folklore hero popularized in Canadian and American culture, known for his supernatural feats that lead to speculation of whether or not he was a real person. Tommy Lee, interview with Tony Bancroft, *Resource Global*, December 20, 2018.

using the commodification and commercial success of *Mulan* outside of mainland China as an explanation for the use of cultural and historical alterations.[126] Chuanmao Tian, Mingwu Xu and Caixia Xiong discuss Mulan's individualism as a result of the use of a Disney "formula" of stories that garner success, which also includes the incorporation of "romantic escape", the normalization of acting against public interests and the triumph of "good over evil" as part of the tropes that distorts and Americanizes Mulan's story.[127] Thus, Disney's *Mulan* (1998) is often charged with making Mulan a more Western heroine to make her acceptable to a global market.[128]

Jing Yin, in his comparison of Disney's adaptation of Mulan to Chinese versions, argues that Disney "redefines [Chinese] culture on their own terms" in their appropriation of non-Western materials into a Western frame.[129] Like Limbach and Fruzińska, Yin makes note of the way that Disney emphasizes individualism, self-discovery, and the image of the "powerful girl" in the film to promote her as a positive American role model.[130] Her outcast status in refusal of complying with societal needs and joining the army in defiance of women being unable to join further emphasizes the aspects of feminism and individuality in Mulan for Yin, but he uses these traits to explain the poor reception in Chinese audiences and an "emasculation of Chinese values."[131]

Similarly, Jinhua Li discusses *Mulan* as a homogenization into the "Disney Princess roster" that meets their status quo in their longstanding tradition of personal growth,

---

[126] Dong (2006), "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan," 228-229.
[127] Tian and Xiong, "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation," 862-863, 872; Xu and Tian, "Cultural Deformations and Reformulations: A Case Study of Disney's Mulan in English and Chinese," 204; Li Fei, "Plan for Mulan's Marketing Strategy," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 15.
[128] Xi Chen, "Representing Cultures Through Language and Image: A Multimodal Approach to Translations of the Chinese Classic Mulan," 215, 224.
[129] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 53, 58.
[130] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 53, 57-60, 63.
[131] Yin, "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stores of Mulan," 60, 62, 64.

individualism and independence in their works.[132] He notes some of the departures that Disney's *Mulan* makes from the original, such as her Americanized tomboyish personality, the depoliticizing of her inadvertent recruitment into the army and the rejection of "public duty over personal happiness" which may suggest a cultural difference between China and the United States.[133] While he acknowledges the immense commercial success of *Mulan* outside of China, he merely notes that the film is presentist as it is "loosely based on the anonymous sixth century ballad Ode of Mulan" in favour of the Chinese film *Hua Mulan* (2009), which he feels "de-Disneyfies" Mulan in its more appropriate embodiment of Chinese values.[134]

Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh make similar comments in the repackaging of Mulan into the "gigantic Disney pantheon" through their discussion of negative alterations and perceived insincere efforts made by Disney to balance their need to maintain the Chinese market and to produce a modern, entertaining product with cultural distinctions.[135] They make an interesting point in the inclusion of the "fabled" matchmaker and the Prime Minister character, as a way of "defeating" Chinese antiquated roles of women and detrimental obsession with bureaucracy as a way of promoting presentist values in a deceivingly "Chinese" way.[136] However, despite the deliberate incorporation of Chinese (real or imagined) cultural aspects and redundant cultural minutiae, the "American flavour" of Disney's *Mulan* is impossible to shake off despite the "homework" done to ensure cultural and historical accuracy.[137] Wang and Yeh's

---

[132] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 187, 191.
[133] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 190-191, 194-195, 200.
[134] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 190; Zhu Yi, "Seeing Mulan in the United States," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 21.
[135] Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 179-181, 189; Hongmei Yu, "From Kundun to Mulan: A Political Economic Case Study of Disney and China," *ASIA Network Exchange* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 13; He Zhongshun, "What Does the American Mulan Look Like?" *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 24.
[136] Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 182.
[137] Yi, "Seeing Mulan in the United States," 21-22; Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 181, 188; Peng, "Analysis of Mulan's Selling Points and Marketing Operations," 12.

noting of the conclusion of the film where Mulan successfully restores family honour and marries a "Prince Charming" as a "very Disney, have-it-all" ending may suggest that despite *Mulan* and the original ballad both concluding with Mulan's return to female life, it may have been impossible to balance Disney's agenda and a culturally and historically accurate Mulan within the same film.[138]

Indeed, there are many aspects of the film that from a perspective of familiarity with Mulan as a folk character and heroine, the clumsy blending of American and Chinese customs almost seems inherently offensive. From the grandmother's blind following of "superstitions" like lucky crickets, Mushu's popular culture infused wisecracking, to confusing periodization with the presence of the Forbidden City, a completed Great Wall, and the Huns, who technically did not invade China, one may assume that it is through incompetence or a misunderstanding of Chinese appreciation for tradition that these mistakes were allowed to be incorporated. However, it is also equally as important that the film be recognisable to international audiences, and thus some cultural authenticity must be sacrificed for entertainment and commercial success. While this might seem less than genuine on Disney's part, it softens the accusations of colonialism and misappropriation that often grace critical reviews of *Mulan* (1998).

Children's Picture Books and Films: Alternative Entries in the Chinese-American Diaspora

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and *The Woman Warrior* are not the only entries of the twentieth century that are part of the Chinese-American diaspora, as many picture books and non-Disney films have surfaced from 1998 to the present. While Disney has published its own picture books that further the exceptionality of this tomboyish Mulan, there are other picture books created that flit between authenticity and narratives that more closely fit Disney's *Mulan* (1998). Publishing

[138] Wang and Yueh-Yu Yeh, "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," 182.

easily accessible picture books, Lan Dong reasons, is a way to help foster iconic characterization of cultural icons like Mulan and naturalize values of childhood homes and families in both China and North America, although not without the struggles of remaining faithful to heritage while still selling to North American audiences.[139]

Robert San Souci's *Fa Mulan*, published in 1998, is considered one of the more faithful renditions of the original ballad, even as it is written by a non-Chinese person. The story begins with Mulan portrayed as a willful tomboy as she practices her swordplay in an imitation of the Maiden of Yueh, against her sister's insistence that "proper women do not play with swords! They do not go to war."[140] This version of Mulan identifies the Tartars as the enemy, and she acknowledges both the inevitability of war coming to her in the domestic sphere, and the imminent punishment that would come with refusing the conscription. Mulan volunteers herself, stating that "Little Brother is too young. I am strong. Elder sister says I act like a man," and thus her plan is accepted readily.

This version sees more of her ingenuity in battle, and she is praised by veteran swordsmen as being a perfect balance of male and female energies, and is well versed in the art of war. While her femininity is shown in her sentimental missing of family, and her romantic attractions to handsome fellow soldiers, in the end she raises to the rank of general and wins the battle. She returns victoriously as she does in the ballad, rejecting riches and power to return home, honoured above other famous women for her filiality, like the aforementioned Maiden of Yueh. Part of what may lead to the acceptance of this rendition over Disney's is its close

[139] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 123, 125-127.
[140] Robert San Souci, *Fa Mulan* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1998).

adherence to the original ballad with minimal additions as San Souci reads between the lines of the poem.[141]

Other picture books have similar approaches in merely "retelling" the Ballad. Song Nan Zhang's *The Ballad of Mulan* (1998) and Li Jian's *Mulan* (2014) also remain close to the original ballad, while also putting similar emphasis on incorporating matching texts in traditional Chinese, and including historical maps and notes that historicize her in the Northern Wei, and make mention of the sinicization of the original Tuoba tribe that Mulan is attributed to, whenever mention of her Xianbei heritage is made. Similarly, these versions of Mulan do not make reference to her actions as feminist empowerment, and note that she is brave, and the "love for her family and her father [makes her] into a great soldier."[142] As children are the intended audience, these versions of *Mulan* are meant to be uplifting and inspiring as they seek to connect the Chinese-American diaspora back to "traditional" Chinese culture.

One such non-Disney picture book that straddles these two characteristics comes from Faye-Lynn Wu, as a translation published in 2019. Both kinds of narratives are mentioned, as this Mulan "knows [she] can [serve], [because she is] a strong and able girl."[143] A more feminist tone is evident in this version, as when asked how she could successfully masquerade as male without being discovered, she replies:

> One should not judge another by their appearance alone. When a pair of rabbits run side by side, can you tell the female from male? A woman can fight any battle. Now I am happy once again to just be me, Mulan, a strong and able woman.

Drawing from the original rabbit metaphor featured in the original while inserting an empowering message for the children that read the book, a similar message from Disney's *Mulan*

---

[141] San Souci, author's notes.
[142] Li Jian, *Mulan* (Shanghai: Better Link Press, 2014), back cover; Song Nan Zhang, *The Ballad of Mulan* (California: Pan Asian Publications, 1998).
[143] Faye-Lynn Wu, *Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior*, trans. by Faye-Lynn Wu (HarperCollins, 2019).

(1998) surfaces, albeit in a way that takes pains to remain authentic, as the original untranslated ballad is featured at the end of the book. It is evidently possible to balance the historic and the modern together in a single adaptation, but the demands on the release of a picture book differ from the release of an animated film from a cultural conglomerate like Disney, which must be kept in mind when comparing and contrasting different kinds of media.

Non-Disney Films and Mulan: *Hua Mulan* (1998) and *The Secret of Mulan* (1998)

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) is often portrayed as the West's sole addition to the *Mulan* legacy, but this is pointedly not true: two other films were released in the same year from Western studios, in 1998. Orlando Corradi's *Hua Mulan* features an unruly and immature version of Mulan who is unsatisfied with her lot in life, being forced to do chores for her family even in the company of her many animal companions. Similar challenges to Confucian gender roles are made in this version, as Mulan wishes to go on "impossible adventures" that she desires, as her female life bores her, and she would rather spend time practicing her *wushu*.[144] The crisis of conscription brings this opportunity to her as her father breaks his leg in an accidental fall, though her father denies her the opportunity to enlist in the military despite her training and successful masquerade as a soldier. She is quite martially talented in the battles the audience views, though she is noticeably more arrogant and aggressive when it comes to battling. Despite a lack of any other cultural references outside of the stereotypical dress of the Chinese official that includes a Qing *guanmao*, the movie ends more or less along prior adaptation plotlines.[145] After she rescues Xiao Pang, the only soldier that does not suspect her of being a spy

[144] *Wushu*, otherwise known as Chinese *Kung Fu*, is a Chinese martial art which generally refers to any style of Chinese martial art. The use of *wushu* in this film is sporadic and vague, which suggests that the use of this concept is likely meant to serve similarly to other easily recognisable Chinese cultural markers.

[145] Qing *guanmao* was the official headwear of Qing officials, which consists of a black velvet cap that has an ornamental finial on the top that was interchangeable and indicated relative rankings of officials in court.

because of her strange mannerisms, from the enemy camp in a fell swoop that wins the war simultaneously, she returns home from war and reveals her female self to him. They profess their love for each other, and they marry.

Bill Schwartz's *The Secret of Mulan*, also released in 1998, takes a similar approach to *Hua Mulan* (1998), albeit with a visual distinctiveness in using bug and animal themed characters. Mulan is once more shown to have unwanted military prowess, as she is told in the opening scene that "nobody wants a rebellious headstrong girl who doesn't know how to behave" as she tries to use her ingenuity to unsuccessfully speed up her chores. Conscription is brought to Mulan's family, as Mala-Khan, the primary antagonist opposing the Emperor, brutally and mercilessly battles to gain control of the region. Her father, similar to other versions, has old wounds from the last war, but no son to replace him, which leads to Mulan taking his place without permission to fight "for honour, for country, because [she] loves this land." Tucking her antennae away, deepening her voice and taking the name Hu-A, which Dong notes has a resemblance to an oft-heard American military war cry, she quickly rises through the ranks and becomes a captain.[146]

Mulan's virtue is strongly emphasized, as faced with the choice between capture and death, she chooses to fall to her death. This prompts her body's metamorphosis into a butterfly, which is a symbol for the awakening of her full military capacity, which unfortunately takes several days. Without Hu-A, the military fails against the might of Mala-Khan, especially with the aid of a traitor in the emperor's ranks. Mulan arrives at the final battle in the nick of time and uses her new-found power to handily win against Mala-Khan single-handedly, and is valorized for her efforts. Similar to *Hua Mulan* (1998), she is revealed to the love interest of the story, who

[146] Dong (2011), *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States,* 160.

is delighted to discover that the courageous and brave Hu-A is the same person as the brave and beautiful Mulan.

These versions, while generally undiscussed and unpopular, are examples of the creation of a transnational Mulan, as adaptations of her story spring unbidden from her widening international reputation. Their general lack of academic attention prompts an additional question when considering the rhetoric between Disney and Chinese scholars, as these versions take as many liberties as Disney does with various aspects of *Mulan*, including setting, Mulan's own personality, and the inclusion of Orientalist stereotypes, as seen through occasional derogatory stereotypical characters in both movies. Much of the historiography claims that the sole issues with Disney's adaptations lies in the misappropriation of Mulan's legacy and Chinese culture, but it is more feasible to pin the blame on a defensiveness towards Disney and the American film industry itself, as its own reputation precedes it and potentially sabotages itself in the eyes of scholars. The question then becomes less of accuracy and homage to the original ballad and the legacy of Mulan – a rhetoric only made possible by Mulan's entry into the transnational stage.

Hua Mulan (2009): A Chinese Response to Disney's *Mulan*

It is interesting to note that in response to Disney's *Mulan* (1998), a film titled *Hua Mulan* was released in mainland China, directed by Jingle Ma (b. 1957) in 2009. In essence, the film was an attempt to reclaim Mulan from Disney in its dedication to being historically, culturally and politically accurate, restoring gender and historic significance to Mulan, re-feminizing Mulan and re-politicizing the story of *Mulan*.[147] As noted above, Mulan's globalization was not well received in mainland China and resulted in low box office ratings, and

[147] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 187-188, 192-193.

thus heavily nationalist debates over the 'ownership' over Mulan began, which leads to *Hua Mulan* (2009)'s claim to return her to China.

Mulan is recreated once more as a heroic woman who is fundamentally defined by filial piety and patriotism, and who is loving and devoted to her father.[148] She is given a military education and a quick wit, is domesticated and submissive, and is considered to have a great future life in saving her father, in comparison to Disney Mulan's bleak future as an unmarriageable daughter.[149] In this film, Mulan is not a woman disguised as a man as much as she is a woman who fights the war as herself, leaving out some of the conflict between internal femininity and external masculinity, or having to go to great lengths to feign external masculinity, as seen in other versions of Mulan.[150] That the film *Hua Mulan* (2009) takes great pains to separate itself as an entity from Disney's *Mulan* and isolate it from the history of *Mulan* as a direct response to Disney's movie, suggest the negative public reception of Disney's *Mulan* in China was influential in Mulan's characterization in the film.

Similar to "The Ballad", Mulan is demonstrated to be filial in taking care of her father, as she cleverly tricks him into drinking his medicine for his own good. In flashbacks, she is seen as virtuous through her prior defense of the weak and demonstrates superior morality in stopping childish fights between fellow soldiers in the military, scolding them for shaming a soldier who was pining for his mother. Early in her military career, she is discovered to have breasts by fellow soldier Wentai, and attempts to cover them up by taking the punishment for another soldier's theft, which was death. He visits her prior to her execution and, understanding her filial piety, promises to not reveal her secret by burning her body after she is killed. Luckily, she is

[148] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 193 ; Jing Li, "Retelling the Story of a Woman in Hua Mulan (*Hua Mulan* 2009): Constructed Chineseness and the Female Voice," 366.
[149] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 193-194.
[150] Jinhua Li, "Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality," 197.

saved by a timely distraction that allows her to escape punishment, and she continues to valiantly serve the military despite being quickly sentenced to death for a crime she did not commit. Her virtue and devotion to the state reaches its peak in the solution that Wentai and Mulan come up with together: despite the epic romance that is built between them throughout the film, he will marry the Rouran princess in order to bring peace to the land, which acts as a dual sacrifice in her denial of a court post to return home to her father, as well as giving up the one she loves for the state. Even Wentai's virtue is second to Mulan's as he offers her the chance to elope with him even after he is sworn to marry the princess but is turned down by Mulan's dedication to the state.

While Mulan's cousin Tiger accompanies her in the military to teach her "maleness", the main changes that must take place in her personality lies in her sensibility, a common marker for femininity in Confucian gender ideals. She is visibly sensitive to death, and her affections for Wentai are to blame for causing the death of comrades, as she is willing to risk them all to ensure that he is safe. At the critical turning point in the war, Mulan continues to be plagued by her emotions and begins to drink heavily, despite Wentai constantly encouraging her to let go of them to become a strong leader. He takes this into his own hands and fakes his own death to steel her resolve. It is successful, and Mulan quickly becomes the leader the Chinese military needed to win the war.

The Mulan in this film is quite different from Disney's in her emotional developments as a character and a warrior, and is a clear attempt to "tell a Chinese story to the Chinese".[151] She is not a social outcast who uses the opportunity to better herself, and is instead a strong-willed patriot. However, as a quite standard adaptation of Mulan, it received mixed reviews as well,

[151] Jing Li, "Retelling the Story of a Woman in Hua Mulan (*Hua Mulan,* 2009): Constructed Chineseness and the Female Voice," 363.

with a lower average score of 6.9/10 on Douban, which may suggest that some of the aspects of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) that were effectively 'responded to' by *Hua Mulan* (2009) might have actually been enjoyed by Chinese audiences, which complicates the narrative between China and the West that scholarship tends to illustrate.[152]

Analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (2020)

The film begins with a more deliberate nod to the history and legacy of *Mulan*, as the narrator states that "there are many tales of the great warrior Mulan, but ancestors, this one is mine." From a young age, Mulan is seen to have a borderline supernatural prowess because of her abundance of *qi*, which her father explains as a metaphor for maleness that she is not meant to have as a young woman. Between her prodigious skill and tomboyish nature leading to careless and reckless behaviour on the rooftops of her village, she is at risk of being shunned by society as a "witch", and is asked to conceal her *qi* so that she may properly get married and bring honour to her family. Just as she did in the animated film, Mulan fails to be approved by the matchmaker as her attempts to conceal a spider with a tea pot cause complete mayhem, which provokes the matchmaker to loudly declare to the public that she is a worthless woman for not having the innate qualities of a good wife.

This time around, the enemies that Mulan must defend the nation against are the Rourans led by Borï Khan, notably one of the more commonly chosen enemy invaders in Chinese adaptations. Once more, her father is shown as incapable of properly enlisting, and finally lashing out, as Mulan insists that he not join the military due to his condition, that she should "learn her place." Mulan steals the armor and leaves her hairpin behind, as the switch from

[152] Ting Zhang, Jingle Ma, and Bonnie, "*Hua Mulan* (2009)," November 27, 2009, https://movie.douban.com/subject/3264045//.

female to male takes place. Her father blames himself for being indulgent with her martial inclinations, but under the penalty of death, it is too late to stop her. Naturally talented as she is, she quickly rises through the ranks, to the point where she is even offered the hand of Commander Tung's daughter, as her military excellence and virtue is used as an indicator for a suitable match. She spends most of her time in the military concealing her *qi* due to prior advice from her father, but through much taunting from Xianniang, a fellow *qi* manipulator, she realizes that she must return to her original self in order to use her power effectively, as noted by the deliberate playing of the Reflection melody. While Mulan was militarily superior to her fellow soldiers prior to this awakening, she becomes virtually invincible in a blaze of empowering glory. With the influence of near superhuman powers, one must wonder if the *wuxia* or knight-errant genre were part of the inspiration behind this rendition.

As one would assume from the unprecedented dominance of this version of Mulan over other men and fellow soldiers, the discussions of gender roles and feminism are naturally quite heavy handed. With her abundance of *qi*, Mulan is a typical tomboy who loves to play tricks and is not afraid of spiders, unlike her sister, who fulfills her role as bride perfectly by the end of the film. Similar to the 1998 film, Mulan is actively uncomfortable wearing makeup and prefers to make jokes and complain that she is hungry during the buildup to the matchmaker scene, instead of being nervous to potentially meet her future husband as a result of her efforts. Mulan's femininity is retained in other aspects of her personality, such as her aversion to male nudity, her homesickness, and her opinionated rejection of the other men objectifying women together as an act of male camaraderie.

Her successful maleness is eventually transferred to a general trust and respect for her person, as seen in the scene where Mulan warns Commander Tung that Rourans have snuck past

their lines, putting the Emperor in grave danger. In the 1998 film, Mulan returns to the Imperial City with dire information about the Huns, but no one will listen to her because she has been exposed as female to her male colleagues, and it is only until the Emperor is snatched right in front of their eyes that this trust is re-established. In the 2020 film, Mulan returns to warn Commander Tung, who will not listen to her and threatens to execute her if she does not leave. The divergence in this scene comes from Honghui, who uses the referenced lines "you would believe Hua Jun. Why do you not believe Hua Mulan" as a man who not only does not view her in the stereotyped sexist mindset of historic China, but as a fellow warrior. Their colleagues agree, and Commander Tung grudgingly agrees to listen to Mulan, against his better judgment. This progressivism from the 1998 film is stepped up in this 2020 scene, a move which director Niki Caro (b. 1966) may have felt better suits contemporary audiences.

Mulan (2020) provides the audience with an additional plot line that further explores the dialogue of female subjectivity and emancipation. Xianniang, the witch that allies herself with Borï Khan in order to live in a society that does not shun her for her powers, is repeatedly denied agency by the condescending Rouran leader, who reminds her that "[she] was a scorned dog when [he] found her, and when [he] sits on the throne, that dog will have a home," after she threatens to kill him for calling her a witch. Her desire to escape a patriarchal society that shuns her is mirrored with Mulan's situation, whose perspective the audience returns to in the next scene, as she is told that she has been given an auspicious match by the matchmaker for the betterment of her family, a fate that Mulan is evidently unhappy with. Mulan's volunteering for conscription, while in the defense of her father, can also be interpreted similarly to the 1998 film's search for individuality by joining the military where she might truly belong, as she is not able to successfully fulfill her female duties.

Throughout the course of the film, Mulan and Xianniang have a dialogue about the use of their *qi* powers, which eventually leads to Xianniang asking Mulan to join her in "taking their place", an echo of Mulan's father's outburst that she ought to know her place in society. Having shed her male disguise and choosing to save the emperor, however, Mulan is able to achieve this dream of securing her place as a defender of the state, while Xianniang remains allied to Borï Khan. This ends in her inevitable death as an antagonist, as she is struck by an arrow defending Mulan from harm, in what is possibly her first and only independent act in the film. The difference between these two women is palpable: the virtuous, filial Mulan sticks to her principles and is rewarded, and the morally ambiguous and ambitious Xianniang is eventually struck down. The audience is left to come to their own conclusions about the ending of the film: Mulan has rejected her chance at a military post in favour of returning to her father, but upon the visit of the military to her home village to bring the gift of a newly smithed sword and a second offer of a military post leaves the content Mulan to ponder whether or not to accept the offer. This is where *Mulan* (2020) diverges from the narrative the most, as the return to domesticity that trademarks other adaptations of *Mulan* is potentially discarded in favour of Mulan openly being given a permanent position of power that is not necessarily denied when offered a second time.

Mulan in 2020: Continued Debates of Cultural Authenticity and Controversy

The debate over Mulan's status as a treasured Chinese female warrior and transnational cultural icon continues with the latest additions to her legacy with Disney's *Mulan* (2020). Expectations were naturally high, as the critical acclaim for *Mulan* (1998) fostered a cultural legacy just on its own, demonstrated by 2016 controversies over the potential casting of Jennifer Lawrence as Mulan in the live-action remake, sparking criticism online. Other issues plagued the

development and reception of *Mulan* (2020), as Disney faced fire from the public for the lead actress Liu Yifei's sympathies to the police crackdowns in Hong Kong, and the crediting of Uyghur concentration camps for its filming location leading to boycotts of the film in Taiwan and Hong Kong.[153] As well, general trends towards preference for Marvel films over other American films hinted ominously at the impending lackluster reception in China, with a clear preference for Chinese industry.[154] However, the issues of piracy and the COVID-19 pandemic forced a paid Disney+ Channel release, which led to losses in profits and led many to suggest that this version of *Mulan* was doomed to do poorly even before it was to be released. Despite pressure from the U.S. to crack down on piracy, the film was pirated an estimated 250,000 times prior to its official Disney+ release.[155] Whether or not this was intentional is uncertain, but the controversy surrounding the film's release and the government ban on media coverage surrounding the release of the film was enough to elicit less than enthusiastic responses overall.[156]

Similar to Disney's *Mulan* (1998), the reception of the film amongst critics and audiences is not so straightforward. Critics praise the film for its action scenes and depictions of strong female empowerment in Mulan and Xianniang as well as the relatability of Mulan's struggles with self, though some are left missing the catchy music and animal companions of the 1998 film.[157] Others slam the film for its flat characters, unsatisfactory handling of Chinese elements

[153] Yanni Chow and Carol Mang, "Disney's 'Mulan' Gets Cold Reception in Boycott-Leading Hong Kong," *Reuters* (Sep 17, 2020); Christina Pan, "Exceptionally Awful, Shockingly Stupid, and Despicable: Mulan 2020," *The Spectator* (Oct 12, 2020); Matt Haldane, "Piracy Hurt Disney's Mulan in 1999, and it Appears to be Happening Again," *SCMP* (Sep 16, 2020); Elaine Yau, "Disney's Mulan Likely to Bomb in China, Hit by Coronavirus, Boycotts and Controversy, Liu Yifei Film Fails to Inspire Audiences," *SCMP* (Sep. 9, 2020); Amy Qin and Amy Chang Chen, "'Mulan' Fizzles in China," *New York Times* (Sep. 14, 2020); Xinmei Shen, "Disney's Mulan Hit With Bad Reviews in China as Pirated Copies Available Online Ahead of Theatrical Release," *SCMP* (Sep. 8, 2020); James Milliward, "More Hun than Han: Reading the Tabghach 'Ballad of Mulan' in 2020," *Association for Asian Studies* (Sep. 17, 2020).
[154] "Hollywood Losing Ground to Chinese Blockbusters?" *Taipei Times,* (Jan 20, 2020).
[155] Naomi Xu Elegant, "Disney Tailored 'Mulan' for China. It Still 'Never Had a Chance' at the Mainland Box Office," *Fortune* (Sep 20, 2020).
[156] Chow and Mang, "Disney's 'Mulan' Gets Cold Reception in Boycott-Leading Hong Kong,"
[157] Beth Webb, "Mulan (2020) Review," *Empire Online* (Sep. 3, 2020); Johnny Oleksinski, "'Mulan' Review: Disney+ Live-Action Remake Delivers Real Guts, Reinvention," *New York Post* (Sep. 3, 2020); Joe Morgenstern, "'Mulan' Review: Woman Warrior Redux," *The Wall Street Journal* (Sep. 3, 2020); Manohla Dargis, "'Mulan' Review: A Flower Blooms in Adversity (and Kicks Butt)," *New York Times* (Sep 3, 2020).

leading to an impression of a "Western film with a Chinese backdrop", with dated elements and "soggy" and over-simple scripting.[158] One particularly critical review, aptly titled "Exceptionally Awful, Shockingly Stupid, and Despicable: Mulan 2020" by Christina Pan slams the films for abuses of human rights, the regurgitation of national White myths and the appropriation of a beloved character failing both Eastern and Western audiences alike. She argues that the ballad references throughout the film come off as lame attempts to score "brownie points", and the main character fails to compel as a super-powered heroine with few faults. Douban evaluations for *Mulan* (2020) are no better, with an underwhelming average score of 5.0/10 and 85% of users rating the film three stars or lower, with similar complaints of lack of relatability and character development, awkwardness and flat plot lines.[159] What may have seemed like an easy cash grab in the renewal of the box office success that the original Disney's *Mulan* enjoyed, has become unexpectedly more complicated with factors in and out of Disney's control.

Much like Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, director Niki Caro stated in interviews that she "wanted to do right by the original ballad, while paying homage to the [original] animation" by doing deliberate museum and historical research for costume design.[160] As well, she cited a desire to make a modern and powerful epic in *Mulan* (2020), and would achieve this by mixing cultural details with contemporary creativity for "something for everyone in *Mulan*" while still being culturally relevant.[161] Evidently, there is an inherent clash between the intentions of the director and the reception by the audiences and critics alike solely based on the disconnects between the content of the film, the Chinese legacy of *Mulan*, and the expectations of

[158] Xinmei Shen, "Disney's Mulan Hit With Bad Reviews in China as Pirated Copies Available Online Ahead of Theatrical Release," *SCMP* (Sep. 8, 2020); Devansh Sharma, "Mulan Movie Review: Loyal to Disney, But not Brave or True to the Times," *First Post* (Dec. 4, 2020); K. Austin Collins, "'Mulan' Remake is Shrewd But Not Sharp," *Rolling Stone* (Sep. 4, 2020).
[159] Lauren Hynek et al., "Mulan (2020)," September 4, 2020, https://movie.douban.com/subject/26357307/.
[160] Pedro R. Garcia, interview with Niki Caro and Bina Dai, *Movie'n'co UK*, Jan. 29, 2020.
[161] Niki Caro, "On-Set Interview," *Walt Disney*, Apr. 1, 2020.

faithfulness to the animated Mulan without considering the extenuating circumstances of the film's release.

Matchless Mulan (2020): Competing in the Box Offices of Mainland China

As the *Mulan* adaptations are commonly cited to be attempts at securing Chinese box office profits, given the mainland Chinese film industry's wary relationship with Hollywood depictions and dominance in the local market, it is unsurprising to find that a Chinese-made adaptation was also released in 2020, directed by Chen Cheng (b. 1994). While it is uncertain whether or not *Matchless Mulan* (2020) is a response to Disney's *Mulan* (2020), a reasonable assumption can be made that the adaptation is meant to compete with the Disney film at the box office, as well as the seemingly endless tug-of-war that began over the "ownership" of Mulan as a cultural icon in 1998. Despite their attempts at a culturally accurate version of *Mulan* to counter Disney's, this version did not do well either, garnering an even lower score of 4.6/10 on Douban, with much of the criticism complaining of inconclusive endings and a strange credit to the People's Liberation Army.[162] Nonetheless, the film provides an interesting comparison to Disney's *Mulan* (2020)'s progressive, feminist depiction of *Mulan.*

Set in the Wei Dynasty with an impending Rouran invasion, the story begins with an ominous visit to a witch who informs Mulan's parents that she is not destined for marriage, and that she was destined to face greater ordeals in the company of "divine soldiers". Without fail, the conscription notice falls on the lap of Mulan's aging father, who naturally insists on enlisting despite his condition. As he is preparing to leave, he instructs Mulan's mother to find a matchmaker and prevent her from practicing swordplay, indicating that he believes in the

[162] "Matchless Mulan (2020)," May 7, 2020, https://movie.douban.com/subject/34833858/.

ominous fortune told by the witch. Much like many of the more modern adaptations, Mulan decides to leave for the military without permission. Her virtuosity is highly emphasized in this film, as she refuses to kill any enemy soldiers since she is just a replacement for her father in the military. Nonetheless, she rises in the ranks.

The patriotic Mulan declares herself a defender of the Wei Dynasty, as she volunteers to defend Changpingcang Fortress with very little chance for survival, as the Imperial Army rushes to defend Lishui City. Mulan and her fellow soldiers endure repeated attacks on dwindling rations, and eventually her colleagues become so demoralized that they want to leave, but virtuous and patriotic Mulan will not retreat and insists on waiting for reinforcements. Interestingly, Mulan reveals her sex to her comrades in order to shame the other men and inspire them to hold onto the fortress longer, mimicking wartime rhetoric that was used in early twentieth century adaptations. The film ends inconclusively in the midst of a bitter fight where Mulan has accepted her death as the reinforcements show up at the last possible moment.

Much like other *Mulan* adaptations, Mulan's gender expression is coded by feminine actions and attitudes that remain, even under her male disguise. This is a dutiful, cheeky Mulan who, despite her inclinations for the martial arts and her more masculine sense of justice, excels at her needlework and happily helps others in her community. As a result of her martial prowess and swift justice against thieves who harass her younger brother Mudi, she is called a "beast like the Rourans" for her tomboyish inclinations, but this turns out to a beneficial attribute as she rises through the ranks in the military. Despite the harshness of the military, Mulan still demonstrates some feminine sensibility in the care she exhibits for Prince Shuo when she is able to best him in sparring, and bashfulness when women are attracted to her successful male projection.

Mulan's aversion to the taste of alcohol is also another common feminine trait used in previous Mulan adaptations, which leads to Shuo jokingly saying that she is "brave on [the] battlefield, but delicate when [she] drinks." Evidently, there is an expectation for males to be war-mongering and appreciative of the taste of alcohol as masculine traits. The interplay between male and female Mulan is most evident, however, when she claims she can dance better than the dancing women present for entertainment. The men laugh, as they believe Mulan is joking, but she gets up and demonstrates her aptitude in dance, singing a song that describes her actions in the military,

> I've fought a hundred battles in this armor/with no time for cosmetic beauty
> with the army I march to the border.
> No words of farewell for my parents.
> A tent serves as my boudoir/on cold steel is my bloody reflection.
> My substitute for a woman's flowery makeup
> could I yet take off this shining armor/
> to don the clothes of noble marriage?

The men are almost "fooled" into believing that she is a woman by her dancing, indicating that dancing is a woman's act. After Prince Shuo figures out that Mulan is a woman, his perspective on her is changed, as if knowing she was a woman all along meant that she would not be up to the task of military deeds. However, her strength of spirit and patriotism are all that Mulan needs to convince him that she is no ordinary female. Once more, male gender expression becomes inherently tied to not only martial prowess and emotional strength but patriotism itself, but Mulan's status as exceptional woman seems to defy this structure. In the midst of competing depictions of Mulan as a valorous daughter with the adequate skills to save her family and characterization of Mulan as a willful rebel that becomes a heroine in her own right, one must

note the extent to which the 2009 and 2020 versions of Mulan from China aim to reject perceived "American" traits that were added by Disney in its films.

Concluding Thoughts

Through comparing different versions of Mulan both chronologically in terms of their historical and cultural contexts, and through their use of Mulan as daughter, woman and citizen as a method of social commentary, this study has established a general narrative for the transformation of Mulan from a filial daughter, to a staunch patriot, to the present day inspiring woman warrior with an international reputation. As a cultural icon and pseudo-historical figure, she has been used to facilitate discussions of gender as it is expressed in each adaptation and interactions between subject and state in an entertaining and unchallenging manner. Because of this general disposition, she has persevered as a treasured aspect of Chinese culture, even in the face of modernization in the twentieth century, and its emancipatory attitudes towards women. Each adaptation, even those mired in controversy and divisive debates, is an important development in Mulan's character, which resulted in this study's wide selection of adaptations.

What can be drawn from the comparing and contrasting of these films, and the operas, poems and novels before them, is a sense of the discourse that surrounds Mulan as an ideal citizen and woman, being interpreted by a variety of authors and filmmakers who aim to portray her in the "correct" way. With feminism and patriotism being on the opposite ends of a scale between Disney and China in the twentieth century, the films released about Mulan from 1998 onward actively engage with different interpretations of the "purpose" of Mulan. Through analysing Disney and other Western adaptations of *Mulan* alongside both modern and historical

Chinese adaptations, one may posit the priorities in Mulan's overarching themes depend on which cultural perspective it comes from.

Western and Disney adaptations generally prefer to portray Mulan as a role model for feminism and girl power as a positive and autonomous female actor, even as the continuation of the crossdressing trope as part of the plot softens the overall message. Chinese adaptations prefer not to emphasize Mulan's activism as an empowered woman practicing agency, but as a dutiful citizen serving the state, be it part of tributes to prior adaptations of Mulan or the continued usage of Mulan as a venue of mass propaganda. Disney's obligations to create financially successful works must be kept in mind when considering these factors, as they are important in Western considerations of inclusions and alterations of plots, and how aspects of Mulan are dealt with in their films. There is an equal amount of concern from the Chinese filmmaker perspective in promoting their own films, as part of the desire to have a successful domestic film industry over Hollywood, which may be interpreted as equally financially minded as culturally. This partially explains the defensiveness which is seen in Chinese scholarship surrounding Disney's *Mulan.* Personal and national identification with Mulan is integral to the rhetoric, and these responses are natural and expected.

From a Western perspective, she is used as a positive female role model for self-discovery, and from the Chinese perspective, she remains as the expression of the ideal daughter and citizen. It would not be unreasonable to argue that through the release of multiple Mulan films from China and the often overly critical historiography, Chinese historiography's defensiveness stems from both a matter of national pride and desire for control over the global reputation of a character so treasured as a cultural icon. It may be that Disney means no offense at all in their depictions, as directors for the film clearly express admiration for Mulan's

virtuosity and personal strength and view it as empowering through a Western perspective. Thus the clash between tradition and modernity continues from positions that previously saw little dissenting discourse on the way that she ought to be portrayed, especially in that Mulan continues to be depicted in a historical manner instead of being readapted in more modern cultural settings, and crossdressing to achieve her goals.

As a practice in both regular life and in theatre, and as a plot device, crossdressing has sought to provide complexity and amusement to plays and operas, as well as encouraging an opening of the imagination of both the writers and the audiences towards Confucian sex and gender norms and the structure of society. The fantasy aspect of crossdressing in theatre is a safe exploration that does not seek to promote societal upheaval, and instead is entertaining. From male femme fatales to fierce female warriors, crossdressing retains relevancy up to the present day, in spite of the gradual movement towards equality between sexes. Its persistence as a trait can be credited to a rich cultural history that exists within the legacy of Mulan that stems from historic traditions that aim to valorize Mulan's actions, instead of condemning them.

In comparing and contrasting the way that Chinese gender norms are interacted with through the use of the crossdressing trope over time, this study has established that crossdressing as seen in *Mulan* has become more than an acceptable way for Mulan to interact with the male public sphere, but is also as integral to cultural tradition as the overall settings and her personal motives. The original ballad and other early adaptations of *Mulan* use crossdressing as a plot device that both satisfies the potential urgency of the situation and family honour in both serving the patriarch of the family and the state. Ming Dynasty depictions default to humorous usage of the trope, while Qing Dynasty authors use it to dramatize Mulan's sacrifices. With the intentional twentieth century revival of heroines like Mulan through the rising film industry and the

popularity of the female knight-errant genre, mainland Republican and communist-era versions invoke a more nationalist impetus behind using the crossdressing trope as a demonstration of duty that all citizens, women included, ought to exercise to defend the state in invoking a sense of community. Mulan's dedication to duty was meant to be inspiring because of her willingness to risk her personal safety as she crossdresses to join the army. Recent adaptations seem to place the least importance on her crossdressing in favour of other themes, such as the above mentioned feminism and patriotism, which demonstrates a historical shift in the interpretation of crossdressing as part of *Mulan* that changes alongside Mulan herself in terms of her outward expressions of gender and how they contribute to adaptations.

Most adaptations, even Disney's *Mulan* from 1998 and 2020 included, make the distinction between the male and female spheres, and the roles that come with them. Men are responsible for the public, and women are responsible for the private. In abandoning her loom and donning male armor, she is temporarily leaving her female life for a male one, but temporary is the key word here: Mulan would otherwise not be acceptable to original audiences if they felt that she was being transgressive. In this new male role, she accomplishes her goals of keeping her father out of the conscription call by successfully entering the male role. To achieve this, stories of *Mulan* and other women who masquerade as males to enter scholarly life like *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Women in love* use crossdressing as the physical part of their temporary maleness, but also incorporate cultural markers of maleness to complete the disguise, such as male camaraderie tropes, and exhibiting *wen* and *wu* characteristics where applicable.

This study also demonstrates that discussions of Disney are often overgeneralized and do not generally examine relevant considerations that may be of importance when analysing and critiquing the Disney films, including economic concerns, artistic expression and their attempts

to keep as much cultural relevance as possible in their renditions, despite having no obligation to maintain them, as other Chinese authors and filmmakers had when creating their own versions with cultural and political contexts. Through this discussion of various Disney adaptations and alterations, and those that have been created after the initial 1998 movie, one possible conclusion that may be taken from this study is that economic success and historical accuracy may be incompatible in the case of Disney and other filmmakers.

Whether this is primarily because of the compressed nature of historical depictions in the film inevitably cause alterations and erasures, or the overarching influence of popular culture on historical depictions in light of economic success is uncertain, as the reasons for criticisms of Disney's historical and cultural depictions are as varied and complex as the original materials that these criticisms defend. It may be more useful to conclude that when historical pasts enter the realm of real or "fabricated" heritage, considerations of intent in depictions ought to be deliberated over as equally as quality and individual contributions to ongoing narratives of shared cultural pasts. This study has taken great pains to emphasize that Disney's departures from the narrative and "inaccurate" use of Chinese cultural aspects and history is not inherently malicious or colonialist, and the narrative must be fully explored, even for the sole purpose of criticism.

This study brings to light the importance of incorporating different perspectives into historical and cultural studies about well-known cultural entities like Mulan. At its core, adaptations of *Mulan* from the original ballad to the 2020 movies are meant to be entertaining. While this study and many others are limited in their ability to gauge their effectiveness as entertainment in previous eras, because this information is not available or existing, and can only generally infer that extant records are an indication of acceptance by audiences and literati alike.

It is beneficial to include this information where it is possible, and reviews and critiques from both the public at the time of release and for those with hindsight or academic expertise are equally as valuable. The inclusion of more public discourses surrounding contemporary adaptations complicates narratives of "successful" and "failed" depictions of *Mulan* in a meaningful way. From these discussions, this study aimed to promote further academic discourse on cultural biases, as those who consider Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Disney's films in their writings often reject them in favour of cultural nitpicking and ardent defense of Mulan's traditional legacy. It is possible to consider these versions of Mulan and the more commonly accepted ones in discussing adaptations over the course of her existence without compromising her original legacy, and perhaps preferable when other studies potentially discuss currently relevant adaptations. As seen through her many retellings and rewritings, *Mulan* cannot exist in a vacuum, as the very nature of her reappearances through historical and modern China counteract this notion.

Over the course of more than a millennium, Mulan has been adapted and transplanted in varying historical, cultural and political contexts since the creation of the original ballad, as part of a national discussion on virtue, filial piety, loyalty and nationalism. As well, Mulan allows for discussion of gender expectations and norms in Chinese society, within the comfortable confines of Chinese theatre, literature and film, where these discussions and themes have been allowed to flourish without becoming controversial or negatively perceived by Chinese society. In analysing Mulan's progression over time, one may trace an interesting potential timeline of the development of patriotism, nationalism, feminism and egalitarianism in China, and her rise to international fame in the modern film industry. Given the fact that Mulan is still a prominent aspect of China's culture, it is clear that Mulan is a "girl worth fighting for."

Bibliography

Allen, Joseph R. "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior." *Positions* 4, no. 2 (1996): 343-379.

Anonymous, "Ballad of Mulan." in *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*. Edited by Han H. Frankel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976: 68-72. Accessed October 23, 2016. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/mulan.pdf

Anonymous, *Mulan Joins the Army* (1903). Translated by Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010.

Anonymous, *Mulan qinü zhuan,* (c. 1800.) https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E6%9C%A8%E8%98%AD%E5%A5%87%E5%A5%B3%E5%82%B3 . Accessed February 3, 2021.

Altenburger, Roland. "Is it Clothes that Makes the Man? Cross-Dressing, Gender and Sex in Pre-Twentieth Century Zhu Yingtai Lore." *Asian Folklore Studies* 64, no. 2 (2005): 165-205.

Anjirbag, Michelle Anya. "Mulan and Moana: Embedded Cultural Coloniality and the Search for Authenticity in Disney Animated Film," *Soc Sci* 7, no. 203 (2018): 88-102.

Bao, Weihong. *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945.* Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015.

Barlow, Tani. "Theorizing *Funü*." In Tani Barlow. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004: 37-63, 381-86.

BBC News, "Chinese Unimpressed with Disney's Mulan," (March 19, 1999).

Belkhyr, Souad. "Disney Animation: Global Diffusion and Local Appropriation of Culture." *International Journal of Human Sciences* 9, no. 2 (2012): 704-715.

Bell, Elizabeth, Haas, Lynda and Sells, Laura. "Introduction: Walt's in the Movies," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture,* 9-15. Edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Bohnenkamp, Max L. "An Anonymous Work from the Book of the Manor House of Lord Che." in *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature*. Edited and translated by Victor H. Marr and Mark Bender. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Brocklebank, Lisa. "Disney's 'Mulan': the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" *Marvels and Tales* 14, no. 2 (2000): 268-283.

Brode, Douglas. "Introduction: Pedagogy, the Pleasure Principle, and American Popular Culture," in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema,* xi-xvii. Edited by Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Brode, Douglas. *It's the Disney Version!: Popular Cinema and Literary Classics*. Edited by Douglas Brode. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Bryman, Alan. *Disney and His Worlds.* London: Routledge, 2003.

Bugard, Karen. "Hollywood and History: A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Film as Historical Understanding," (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3394769), https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/304941109.html?FMT=AI

Caro, Niki. "On-Set Interview", *Walt Disney*, Apr. 1, 2020.

Chen, Sanping. "From Mulan to Unicorn," *Journal of Asian History* 39, no. 1 (2005): 23-43.

Chen, Xi. "Representing Cultures Through Language and Image: A Multimodal Approach to Translations of the Chinese Classic Mulan." *Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (2018): 214-231.

Cho, Sookja. *Transforming Gender and Emotion: The Butterfly Lovers Story in China and Korea.* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor: 2018.

Chou, Hui-ling. "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage. *The Drama Review* 41.2 (Summer 1997): 130-152.

Chow, Yanni and Mang, Carol. "Disney's 'Mulan' Gets Cold Reception in Boycott-Leading Hong Kong," *Reuters* (Sep 17, 2020).

Collins, K. Austin. "'Mulan' Remake is Shrewd But Not Sharp," *Rolling Stone* (Sep. 4, 2020).

Dargis, Manohla. "'Mulan' Review: A Flower Blooms in Adversity (and Kicks Butt)," *New York Times* (Sep 3, 2020).

Dawson, Michael. *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998.

Djao, Wei. "Opinion Status as Ethnic Identity in the Chinese Diaspora," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32, no. 3 (2002): 363-380.

Dong, Lan *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

Dong, Lan. "Writing Chinese American into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of the Song of Mu Lan," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 2 (Apr. 2006): 218-233.

Edwards, Louise. *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Edwards, Louise. "Transformations of the Woman Warrior Hua Mulan: From Defender of the Family to Servant of the State." *Nan Nü* (2010): 175-214.

Edwards, Louise. "Woman Warriors and Amazons of Mid Qing Texts Jinghua Yuan and Honglou Meng." *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (May 1995): 225-255.

Elegant, Naomi Xu. "Disney Tailored 'Mulan' for China. It Still 'Never Had a Chance' at the Mainland Box Office," *Fortune* (Sep 20, 2020).

Fei, Li. “Plan for Mulan’s Marketing Strategy.” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 15-19.

Fleeman, Michael. “Hollywood Hopes More Movies Follow Clinton to China,” *World Tibet Network News* (July 12, 1998) https://web.archive.org/web/20110705114829/http://www.tibet.ca/en/newsroom/wtn/archive/old?y=1998&m=7&p=12_2.

Fruzińska, Justyna. *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company’s Post-1989 Animated Films*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.Garcia, Pedro R. Interview with Niki Caro and Bina Dai, *Movie’n’co UK*, Jan. 29, 2020.

Giroux, Henry A. *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Giroux, Henry A. “Memory and Pedagogy in the ‘Wonderful World of Disney’: Beyond the Politics of Innocence” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*. Edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995: 26-32.

Giunta, Joseph. “’A Girl Worth Fighting For’: Transculturation, Remediation, and Cultural Authenticity in Adaptations of the Ballad of Mulan,” *SARE* 55, no. 2 (2018): 154-172.

Guo, Jie. “Mulan Comes Home From the War: The Meaning of Homecoming in Late Imperial Chinese Literature,” in *Odyssean Identities in Modern Cultures: The Journey Home,* 19-43. Edited by Hunter Gardner and Sheila Murnaghan. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014.

Guo, Yingjie. “China’s Celebrity Mothers: Female Virtues, Patriotism and Social Harmony,” in *Celebrity in China*, 45-66. Edited by Elaine Jeffreys and Louise P. Edwards. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Haldane, Matt. “Piracy Hurt Disney’s Mulan in 1999, and it Appears to be Happening Again,” *SCMP* (Sep 16, 2020).

Hao, Fu. “Biographical Sketches.” *Chinese Studies in History* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2001-2002): 11-93.

Harris, Kristine. “Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s-1960s,” in *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960,* 308-329. Edited by. Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

He, Chengzhou. “Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance.” *differences* 24, no. 2 (January 1 2013): 150-172.

Hershatter, Gail and Zheng, Wang. “Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis,” *American Historical Review* (Dec 2008): 1404-1421.

Holcombe, Charles. “The Xianbei in Chinese History,” *Early Medieval China* 19 (2013), 1-38.

"Hollywood Losing Ground to Chinese Blockbusters?" *Taipei Times*, (Jan 20, 2020).

Hseih, Ivy Haoyin and Matoush, Marylou M. "Filial Daughter, Woman Warrior or Identity-Seeking Fairytale Princess: Fostering Critical Awareness Through Mulan," *Children's Literature in Education* 43 (2013): 213-222.

Hua Mulan. Directed by Orlando Corradi. 1997; Italy: Mondo TV.

Hua Mulan. Directed by Jingle Ma. 2009; China: Beijing Poly-bona Film Publishing Company.

Hung, Chang-Jin. "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama." *Modern China* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 149-177.

Jackson, Kathy Merlock and Edgerton, Gary. "Pochahontas as a Disney Princess: History, Legend, Literature and Movie Mythology" in *It's the Disney Version!: Popular Cinema and Literary Classics*, 130-149. Edited by Douglas Brode. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016: 189-200.

Jian, Li. *Mulan.* Shanghai: Better Link Press, 2014.

Jin, Jiang. "Women Playing Men: Same-Sex Relations in Republican China." Masters' Thesis. East China Normal University (2011).

Kasabova, Anita. "Memory, Memorials and Commemoration." *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (Oct 2008): 331-350.

Kile, Sarah E. "Transgender Performance in Early Modern China." *Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24, no.2 (2013): 130-149

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts.* New York: Vintage Books, 1976.

Kiyomi, Kutsukawa. "Disney's Pochahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire," *AJWS* 6, no. 4 (2000): 39-65.

Kwa, Shiamin and Idema, Wilt L. *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010.

Lady General Hua Mu-Lan. Directed by Yueh Feng. 1964; Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers.

Lan, Feng. "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior." *Comparative Literature* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 229-245.

Langfitt, Frank. Review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, The Baltimore Sun (May 3, 1999) https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1999-05-03-9905030250-story.html.

Law, Michelle. “Getting Down to Business: “Mulan” and Disney’s Evolving Progressivism,” *Screen Education* 12, no. 91 (2018): 16-21.

Lean, Eugenia. *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China*/ Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007.

Lee, Tommy. Interview with Tony Bancroft, *Resource Global,* December 20, 2018.

Li, Guo. “The Legacy of Crossdressing in Tanci: On *A Histoire* of Heroic Women and Men,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 5, no. 4 (2011): 566-599.

Li, Jing. “Retelling the Story of a Woman in Hua Mulan (*Hua Mulan* 2009): Constructed Chineseness and the Female Voice,” *Marvels and Tales* 32, no. 2 (2018): 362-387.

Li, Jinhua. “Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009): National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality.” in *Heroism and Gender in War Films*. Edited by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Jakub Razecki. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014: 187-205.

Li, Siu Leung. *Crossdressing in Chinese Opera*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.

Li, Zhuying. “Female Warriors and Reproduction of Patriarchal Narrative of Hua Mulan in *The Red Detachment of Women* (1972),” *Media International Australia* 176, no. 1 (2020): 66-77.

Limbach, Gwendolyn. “’You the Man, Well, Sorta’: Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan.” in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability.* Edited by Johnson Cheu. McFarland, 2013: 115-128.

Louie, Kam and Edwards, Louise. “Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing *Wen* and *Wu*.” *East Asian History* 8 (December 1994): 135-148.

Louie, Kam. “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities,” in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan.* Edited by Kam Louie and Morris Low. London: Routledge, 2003: 1-15.

Lowenthal, David. “The Heritage Crusade and its Contradictions,” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States,* 17-31. Edited by Max Page and Randall Mason. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Ma, Iris. “Imagining Female Heroism: Three Tales of the Female Knight-Errant in Republican China,” *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (2019): 182-204.

Ma, Qian. *Women in Traditional Chinese Theatre: The Heroine’s Play*. New York: University Press of America, 2005.

Madsen, Deborah L. “Chinese American Writers of the Real and the Fake: Authenticity and the Twin Traditions of Life Writing,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 257-271.

Mann, Susan. *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Matchless Mulan. Directed by Chen Cheng. 2020; China: New Studio Media.

Maslin, Janet. Review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, The New York Times (June 19, 1998); Dong (2011), 170-171. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/19/movies/film-review-a-warrior-she-takes-on-huns-and-stereotypes.html

Miller, Susan, and Rode, Greg. "The Movie You See, The Movie You Don't: How Disney Do's That Old Time Derision" in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 43-49. Edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Milliward, James. "More Hun than Han: Reading the Tabghach 'Ballad of Mulan' in 2020," *Association for Asian Studies* (Sep. 17, 2020).

Morgenstern, Joe. "'Mulan' Review: Woman Warrior Redux," *The Wall Street Journal* (Sep. 3, 2020).

Mu, Du. *Mulan Temple* (830 AD), trans. Philip Naudus (2020) http://mulanbook.com/pages/tang/mulan-temple-du-mu. Accessed February 1, 2021.

Mulan. Directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft. 1998; United States: Buena Vista Pictures.

Mulan. Directed by Niki Caro. 2020; United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

Naudus, Philip, "The Complete Account of Extraordinary Mulan" http://mulanbook.com/pages/qing/complete-account-f-extraordinary-mulan. Accessed February 2, 2021.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux des Memoire." *Representations* no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

Oleksinski, Johnny. "'Mulan' review: Disney+ live-action remake delivers real guts, reinvention," *New York Post* (Sep. 3, 2020)

Pan, Christina. Review of *Mulan*, film by Niki Caro, *The Spectator* (Oct 12, 2020) https://www.stuyspec.com/ae/film/exceptionally-awful-shockingly-stupid-and-despicable-mulan-2020.

Pang, Laikwan. "Photography, Performance and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 56-86.

Peng, Shao. "Analysis of Mulan's Selling Points and Marketing Operations." *Chinese Anthropology and Sociology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 11-14.

Qin, Amy and Chen, Amy Chang. "'Mulan' Fizzles in China," *New York Times* (Sep. 14, 2020).

Renhuo, Chu. *Historical Romance of Sui and Tang, Chapters 56-61*. Translated by Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010.

Russell-Cook, Myles. "Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human" in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema*. Edited by Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016: 101-110.

Samuel, Raphael. *Theatres of Memory*. London: Verso, 1994.

San Souci, Robert. *Fa Mulan*. New York: Hyperion Books, 1998.

Schaffer, Scott. "The Past as Product in the Present: Disney and the Imagineering of Histories." in *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema,* 33-42. Edited by Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

Sharma, Devansh. "Mulan Movie Review: Loyal to Disney, But not Brave or True to the Times," *First Post* (Dec. 4, 2020).

Shen, Xinmei. "Disney's Mulan Hit With Bad Reviews in China as Pirated Copies Available Online Ahead of Theatrical Release," *SCMP* (Sep. 8, 2020).

Shu, Yuan. "Cultural Politics and Chinese American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingson's 'Woman Warrior'," *MELUS* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 199-223.

Smithouser, Bob. Review of *Mulan,* film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Pluggedin, https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/mulan/. Accessed Jan 10, 2021.

Sperb, Jason. *Disney's Most Notorious Movie: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012.

The Secret of Mulan. Directed by Peter Fernandez. 1998; United States: Sterling Entertainment Group.

Theiss, Janet M. "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Edited by Susan Brownwell. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002: 47-66.

Tian, Chuanmao and Xiong, Caixia. "A Cultural Analysis of Disney's Mulan with Respect to Translation." *Continuum* 27, no. 6 (2013): 862-874.

Treer, Ian. Review of *Mulan*, film by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, *Empire* (January 1, 2000) https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/mulan-review/. Accessed Jan 10, 2021.

Volpp, Sophie. *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth Century China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Volpp, Sophie. "Gender, Power and Spectacle in Late-Imperial Chinese Theatre," in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Sabrina P. Ramet. Routledge, 1997: 130-148.

Wallace, Mike. *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

Wang, Georgette and Yueh-Yu Yeh, Emilie. "Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 175-193.

Wang, Hanying. "Portrayals of Chinese women's images in Hollywood mainstream films--an analysis of four representative films of different periods." *China Media Research* 9, no. 1 (2013): 75-79.

Wang, Lingzhen. *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-century China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Wang, Yigang. "Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: "Soft Masculinity" and (Mis)engendering China" in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*. Edited by Kam Louie and Morris Low. London: Routledge, 2003: 41-59.

Wang, Zhuoyi, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), Mulan Joins the Army, and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," *Arts (Basel)* 9, no. 3 (July 10, 2020): 78.

Webb, Beth. "Mulan (2020) Review," *Empire Online* (Sep. 3, 2020).

Wing Bo Tso, Anna. "Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature and their English Versions." *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 16, no. 1 (2014): 111-124.

Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia. "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," *MELUS* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 3-26.

Wu, Cuncun. "'Beautiful Boys Made Up as Beautiful Girls': Anti-Masculine Taste in Qing China," in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan.* Edited by Kam Louie and Morris Low. London: Routledge, 2003: 19-40.

Wu, Faye-Lynn. *Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior*. Translated by Faye-Lynn Wu. HarperCollins, 2019.

Xu, Mingwu and Tian, Chuanmao. "Cultural Deformations and Reformulations: A Case Study of Disney's Mulan in English and Chinese," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 182-210.

Xu, Wei. *Ci Mulan.* Translated by Qian Ma. New York: University Press of America, 2005.

Yau, Elaine. "Disney's Mulan Likely to Bomb in China, Hit by Coronavirus, Boycotts and Controversy, Liu Yifei Film Fails to Inspire Audiences," *SCMP* (Sep. 9, 2020.

Yi, Zhu. "Seeing Mulan in the United States." *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 20-22.

Yin, Jing. “Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stories of Mulan.” *The Public* 18, no. 1 (2011): 53-74.

Yu, Hongmei. “From Kundun to Mulan: A Political Economic Case Study of Disney and China,” *ASIA Network Exchange* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 13-23.

Yuanfu, Wei. *Song of Mulan* (750 AD), trans. Philip Naudus (2020), http://mulanbook.com/pages/tang/song-of-mulan. Accessed January 4, 2021.

Yuqian, Ouyang. *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939). Translated by Shiamin Kwa and Wilt L. Idema. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2010.

Zhang, Renjie. “Ode to Mulan: Seeing the Animated Film Mulan.” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 30-32.

Zhang, Song Nan. *The Ballad of Mulan.* California: Pan Asian Publications, 1998.

Zhen, Zhang. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Zhongshun, He. “What Does the American Mulan Look Like?” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1999-2000): 23-24.

Zou, Ying. “Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises in Zaisheng Yuan,” *Late Imperial China* 33, no. 2 (Dec 2012): 119-153