

From Ancient China to Modern West: Cross-dressing in Disney's *Mulan* (1998)

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Abstract

The legend of Mulan is a renowned Chinese folktale that records the heroic deeds of a female warrior who cross-dresses temporarily to fight in her father's stead. The legend has gained popularity in the West since the 20th Century and has been adapted into numerous animations, with Disney's *Mulan* (1998) being the most well-known among the audience worldwide. It is considered as a product of cultural hybridity in which the story frame of the original folktale is used and recreated with new embedded meanings that reflect the ideologies of the contemporary American society. That being so, the representation of cross-dressing in these different versions of the legend varies according to how gender identity is perceived in different cultural contexts.

Despite the fact that both Chinese and Disney's versions place emphasis on Mulan's original female identity and the temporary nature of her cross-dressing, this essay discovers the dissimilar rationale behind each presentation which reflects different cultural values. The analysis of the Chinese versions in the first part of the essay suggests Mulan's adherence to Confucian ethics and her enactment upon the traditional social role of women under the patriarchal paradigm. While the Chinese versions downplay Mulan's male identity, Disney condemns women's cross-dressing because it symbolizes a replication of the patriarchal power and ideology. The representation of Mulan's gender identity in Disney's film reflects a Western conception on selfhood that is based on feminism and individualism. How Mulan ceases to cross-dress in her male camouflage suggests her to embrace her own intelligence and fight independently without having to imitate men. Additionally, Disney proves its conservative attitude on cross-dressing behavior and gender transgression by reinforcing Mulan's heterosexuality through the hinted marital role in the end of the film. The film also prevents emasculation of the male characters by portraying their cross-dressing as comical and superficial in order to ensure their hypermasculinity.

Reflection

Being a Hong Kong student who studies English Literature, I am beyond grateful that this final project in my undergraduate life displays the communication between the two types of culture that have been constructing my personal identity. By working on this project, I was able to integrate my knowledge gained in these four years of studies on topics such as film, gender, children's literature, theatrical performance, and cultural identity. I believe studying literature and humanities subjects enables me to develop critical thinking skill and, more importantly, a deeper understanding of the world and the ability of self-reflexivity. The issue on cross-dressing has led me to think about two questions, including the authenticity of one's appearance (does appearance necessarily reflect one's identity?) and the relationship between individuals and the society (how do social constructs such as clothing and gender affect how one is perceived?). This Capstone project is undoubtedly a fruitful experience that has inspired me to continue to be a creative thinker for the rest of my life after graduation. At last, I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Gleckman for his excellent supervision which provided me with the freedom to explore the topic independently but, at the same time, guided me on the right path with his solid advice and profound knowledge.