

# American Mulan: Powerful and Powerless

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## I. Introduction

The legend of the cross-dressing heroine Mulan originated in ancient China has attracted attention both home and abroad, especially in the U.S. The most popular two American versions of Mulan are a chapter in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* and the Disney feature film *Mulan*, both of which are American reconstruction of the Chinese legendary figure. Chinese American female writer Maxine Hong Kingston rewrote the story of Mulan according to her own understanding; while Disney movie *Mulan* presented an American story in a Chinese context. Using the same prototype, Mulan, and some similar elements such as cross-dressing and battlefield, the two stories try to convey messages which are different, yet share some common ground.

The traditional Chinese Mulan was a courageous girl taking her father's place to join the army due to her father's old age. Disguised as a man, she fought in the army for 12 years and returned triumphantly. She declined appointment bestowed on her by the emperor and went back home. The story praised her filial piety and patriotism. In contrast, the plot in Kingston's book is quite different. In the chapter named White Tigers, the story of Mulan is presented from first-person narrative. When she was 7 years old, Mulan went to the mountains to learn martial art from an old man and an old woman. After 15 years of training, she came back as a woman warrior. She disguised as a man and led a peasant uprising, which was quite strong. They fought a lot of battles, beheaded the emperor and put a new emperor on the throne. During this adventure, her husband came to her and she gave birth to a son. Finally she killed the baron who had inflicted pain upon her village and came back to her husband to be a good wife. Different from the previous two, *Mulan* tells the story of a super heroine. Mulan was arranged to see a matchmaker with the hope of marrying well. However, she spoiled the test and failed her family's expectation. Meanwhile, since the Huns were invading China, the emperor began a new conscription and Mulan's aged father was summoned. Worried about her father's old age, Mulan stole the document and went to the army to take his place in male dress. Her military life was miserable at the beginning but later due to her strong will and intelligence, she saved the army. Unfortunately, her female identity was discovered so that she was disbanded. But she didn't give up; instead, she saved the country. Finally, she returned home with honor and a nice boy friend.

A great deal of effort has been devoted to analyzing *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan*. For instance, historical approach has been used to analyze the cultural transformation of the story of Mulan. The core element persists among all the versions is transgressing, which is always accidental and temporary; and all of the figures are not portrayed as feminist fighting against gender inequality (Dong, Lan, 258,257). Kingston's Mulan also implies the dilemma faced by Chinese women: the individual pursuit and communal commitment (Feng, Lan, 230). In describing such a story, Kingston indeed never critiques patriarchal values or institutional racism (Shu, 202). The Disney movie *Mulan* has also stirred heated discussion, especially in China. Some holds that the film is a perfect representation of cultural

integration, in which Chinese and American elements are mixed to put up a wonderful story (Feng, 34). There is also strong criticism toward this movie, which argues that the movie is a typical example of Orientalism that pits the east against the west, stigmatizes China, and distorts the traditional Chinese folk lore (Jia, 108 and Zhou, 117).

However, little effort has been made to compare *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan* from a gender perspective. This paper tries to compare the two versions and find out what are the similarities and differences, and further delve into the gender message behind. Comparison between the American reconstruction and Chinese original story is beyond the scope of this research.

## II. Female Empowerment

Both *Mulan* and *The Woman Warrior* use certain mechanism to empower the heroine. The process of empowerment is different but shares something in common.

First, the process of empowerment is different. In Kingston's book, Mulan was trained successively for 15 years to build up her body. After the training, she is more powerful than most man, as is mentioned by her teacher: "Even when you fight against soldiers trained as you are, most of them will be men, heavy footed and rough. You will have the advantage." (Kingston, 36) Due to this training, she was able to defeat an army, which was not likely to be accomplished even by her male counterparts. This suggests that female is capable of great power, sometimes even greater than male.

In Disney's film, however, Mulan received training together with other soldiers and she did not exceed them in terms of physical power. But her success was due to her intelligence. She used her brain to save the army instead of her muscles. This process of empowerment is rather ambiguous. But we can still conclude the meaning behind is: female is capable of power.

Second, a very interesting discrepancy between the two versions is the purpose of Mulan. In Kingston's book, Mulan was a female avenger. The reason why she needed power was to avenge her family and village. Her enemies were bandits and barons who inflicted suffering. She even led the army to behead the emperor. While in *Mulan*, she was a patriot soldier. Her power was for defending the country from the Huns' invasion, and she finally saved the emperor and the whole country.

The reasons behind this difference are multi-faceted; one possible explanation may be the source of oppression. Kingston's Mulan rebelled against barons, bandits and the emperor, which suggested that the downtrodden, especially women, faced oppression from those people. Mulan, a representative of oppressed female, fought against those powerful males of higher social status. In other words, this was her desire to fight against the entire social institution. In this sense, the scene of a female warrior beheading a male emperor was quite symbolic. A woman who had acquired power ended the rule of the most powerful man. On the contrary, in the movie, the most dangerous enemy was the invading Huns, and Mulan was in fact an Americanized hyper-individualistic heroine. The most important task for her was to accomplish great achievement, not rebel against social institutions. Saving the whole country was no doubt the greatest achievements one could get. Moreover, the Huns were depicted as extremely cruel with beast-like strong bodies; therefore this was also a story of the "self" against "others". The movie *Mulan* can be described, to some extent, as the story of a

superwoman.

Nevertheless, there are some common elements between the two versions.

To start with, both Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan* have a strong mind and great determination, which is often an essential factor to success. But it should be reminded that their determination to fight is not as easy as such a decision made by man. It's a lot more challenging for a woman to make up her mind to live a military life. Yet, the heroines show their strong will power.

Next, both of them acquire their power through the same means – cross-dressing. Cross-dressing is a clever way to challenge existing patriarchal institutions. In this context, cross-dressing is a means of empowerment, because only through disguised as a man can Mulan show her own capacity and realize her own goal. However, cross-dressing itself is a controversial issue with double sides, which shall be discussed in later parts.

To sum up, both characters Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan* suggests that female are capable of great power, and the two factors that they share are strong minds, and cross-dressing. However, their different roles as female avenger and super heroine decide their different ends.

### III. Female Powerless

Despite the power Mulan possesses, both the novel and the movie illustrate more female powerlessness than powerfulness. Female powerlessness is suggested by some different plots as well as some unifying elements.

First, in *The Woman Warrior*, before going on battlefield, Mulan's parents carved their revenge on her back to let people know their sacrifice. There was very vivid description:

“Then he began cutting: to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems large blades. My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurts terribly – the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot – pain so various... Neither tension nor relaxation helped.”  
(Kingston, 38)

To Mulan, this extreme and various pain is a special ritual, one that she has to go through to accomplish her duty. The tradition of back tattoo has its origin from one of the best know heroes in Chinese history: Yue Fei. His mother tattooed “Jing Zhong Bao Guo (serve the country with unreserved loyalty)” on his back to remind him of patriotism. Little attention was paid to how painful the process was. On the contrary, Mulan's suffering was vividly described. When the ritual is performed on male body, people tend to take it for granted. However, when it is on female, it is quite different. Especially in this case, with the description of the blade, the blood, the wine, the air, what is presented is not carving the words but carving on her back what she will go through in exchange for power. Mulan's parents called it a sacrifice, as the tattoo made her lost part of her female identity given the fact that tattoo is more a symbol of male. As is mentioned later when Mulan was pregnant: “Now when I was naked I was a strange human being indeed – words carved on my back and baby large in front.” (Kingston, 42)

This sacrifice of female identity is also showed by her family life as a wife and a mother.

For a period, she was together with her husband in the army and they had a child. Mulan loved her husband and son deeply; she gave her son a full-month ceremony with care and great love. However, she sent both of them away soon after that. The pain of a mother being telling apart from a newly born baby is beyond imagination, yet Mulan had to endure this. She wanted the baby to be away from her before “he is old enough to recognize [her]” (Kingston, 43).

The female powerlessness is therefore demonstrated through Mulan’s sacrifice, the symbolic tattoo on her back and the fact of being deprived of a loving family. In order to pursue a man’s success, i.e. power, a woman had to make such sacrifice. That is to say, if a woman doesn’t give up part of her female identity, she can never reach the position she desired.

On the other hand, female powerlessness in *Mulan* is expressed through more explicit descriptions.

First, the socially constructed female role was to serve their country by bearing sons. Which implied that female was not able to go on the battlefield, and thus, their value was to bear sons, who can go on the battlefield. Under such premise, the only way a girl can honor the family was through a good marriage. This was shown by girls, all wearing heavy makeup, behaving themselves, lining up waiting to see the matchmaker, and singing “please bring honor to us all...” Then what made a good wife? There were several requirements: first, of course, she should be able to bear sons. The first comment given to Mulan by the matchmakers was “Too skinny. Not good for bearing sons”. Next, in order to serve her husband and parents-in-laws she should behave according to the female codes, namely, “fulfill your duties calmly and respectfully. Reflect before you act.” In this society, female was asked of two duties: give birth to sons and serve the husband’s family; but they were not given any right in return. They were oppressed by the patriarchal social institutions to be at a lower position than the male.

Second, female has completely no right of speech. The society expected female not to think, even if they did, they were forbidden to speak out. For instance, when the soldiers described their dream girl, Mulan’s suggestion “How about a girl with brain, who always speaks her mind” was totally denied. The matchmaker noted down “speaking without permission” as a fault when Mulan answered her call. When the prime minister came to summon Mulan’s farther to the army, she begged not to conscript him. “You would do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man’s presence.” was the response, and Mulan’s farther felt humiliated. As a female, in that society you have completely no right to voice an opinion. When speech is deprived, women have nothing to turn to for seeking their own right.

Through this socially constructed female role in *Mulan*, it is quite clear how powerless female was.

What *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan* share in common that reflect female powerlessness are cross-dressing and their final decision to go back to normal life.

Cross-dressing is the core element in Mulan’s legend. Cross-dressing used as a mechanism to gain power has been discussed above, yet more importantly; it shows the powerlessness of female. It is interesting that male cross-dressing is usually considered differently from female cross-dressing. The male-to-female cross-dressing is often perceived as either comedic or a form of punishment; while female-to-male is usually used by female to

achieve some goals unattainable as female, and therefore strengthen female stereotype (qtd in Ruzicka, 242). Cross-dressing is a gendered behavior which represents the difference and inequality between the two genders. Only by disguising as a man can Mulan achieve her goal, thus, cross-dressing implies the powerless status of female.

Cross-dressing is a behavior which blurred the clear and strict gender line, thus a taboo. In Disney movie *Mulan*, after Mulan's identity was revealed, she was supposed to be sentenced to death. And the attitude toward her changed abruptly. A minute before, she was the hero who saved the whole army; a minute later, she became a "treacherous snake", committed "high treason", and accused of "ultimate dishonor". When General Shang refused to believe her, Mulan asked: "You said you'd trust Ping (Mulan's disguised male name), why is Mulan any different?" Only because she was a cross-dressed woman. In *The Woman Warrior*, however, other people never found out Mulan's female identity, therefore there was no explicit discussion about cross-dressing. But the fact that despite of her great power, Mulan never dared to reveal her identity showed the severity of cross-dressing as a taboo.

Moreover, in both stories, Mulan turned back to her normal life and gave up her public career. In *The Woman Warrior*, Mulan led an uprising and beheaded the king, she could have been the ruler of the country herself, but instead, she chose to put another male peasant on the throne. In *Mulan*, the emperor offered her the position of prime minister but she insisted on going back home. Both heroines were offered great opportunity to pursue a public career in which they may possibly do something to change the lives of other women. But both of them refused this change, not only to other women's life, but even their own life. Therefore their heroic deed was destined to be temporary and didn't impose any change on the society as a whole. As female, they may feel the oppression but they accept it and didn't challenge the status quo even when they were given the opportunity. Even outstanding heroines reaffirmed the patriarchy social status, let alone ordinary female.

To sum up, both *The Woman Warrior* and *Mulan* depict a society in which female is powerless. As a female warrior, Mulan has to sacrifice part of her female identity in exchange for power. As a super heroine, Mulan has to break the socially constructed gender order and face contempt from others. Both of them have to use cross-dressing to get rid of the female yoke, and neither of them challenged the existing gender order.

#### IV. Conclusion

Both Mulan stories under American lenses contain similar message through different devices. Owing to their different style, *The Woman Warrior* a serious novel, and *Mulan* popular movie, their expression differs greatly. The novel offered more details and more delicate descriptions, while the movie, as a cartoon, gives more straight-forward, simple plot. But the messages from these two American Mulan stories are similar. On the one hand, female are capable of power; on the other hand female remain an oppressed gender in the society. The fact that Mulan is an exception is also worth noticing: although a woman can be Mulan, but few of them do so, or choose to gain power. Since they themselves also perpetuate the unequal gender rule and have neither desire nor courage to break it.

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