

I'll Make an American Out of You: Reflections on the Orientalism of Disney's *Mulan* (1998)

Nehal Amer

Teaching Assistant,
Faculty of Al-Asun
(Languages), Ain
Shams University,
Egypt.

Abstract

Disney's repertoire of animated films has traditionally focused on predominantly white/Western characters, but the recent shift in the West towards opening up the cultural canon has recently seen its ripples in the arena of animated fairy tales. However, looking beyond the Western literary and folk traditions for inspiration comes with its own set of complications. Drawing upon Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the present paper extends the scope of Said's postcolonial analysis further East by examining Disney's *Mulan* (1998). By doing so, it attempts to pinpoint the Orientalist gaze embedded in the film despite its supposed celebration of Chinese culture through adapting an Asian source text and spotlighting an all-Asian cast of characters. The paper argues that the film's adaptation of the folk legend attempts to stress the foreignness and exoticness of its source culture while paradoxically erasing

any meaningful traces of difference and heterogeneity in it by domesticating the legend both linguistically and structurally in order to appeal to a wide Western viewership. The paper does so by conducting a close examination of key scenes from the film to identify how the animation and musical styles are employed to underscore the binary opposition between East and West and to align the film's protagonist with the latter. Specifically, the film's supposed feminist message is examined to highlight how it is premised on the propagation of Orientalist stereotypes of Asia. Thus, the paper sheds light on some pitfalls that are to be avoided for such adaptations to go beyond token representation.

Keywords: Disney, Orientalism, Postcolonial Studies, China, Gender Roles

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Introduction

Disney has long branded itself as a creator of universal, timeless stories that could be enjoyed by everyone regardless of personal differences. Yet, in spite of Disney's stated intentions of representing a wider range of stories from different cultures that go beyond the Western fairy tale tradition, a close examination of their portrayal of such cultures proves that the legacy of Orientalism remains embedded in many of their films, and that such portrayals do not often go beyond token and inauthentic representations that only serve to reproduce "racial and gender hierarchy in the United States" (Crenshaw 1282). As a film centring around a woman with a cast made up entirely of non-Western characters, *Mulan* (1998) is especially suitable for the examination of this intersection between race and gender and the extent to which their portrayals regurgitate old Orientalist tropes.

The film follows Fa Mulan, a tomboyish young woman who is unable to meet her society's expectations of becoming a good and obedient wife. After news arrive of an upcoming invasion by the Huns led by Shan Yu, the Chinese Emperor instructs his advisor, Chi-Fu, to conscript one man from each household into the Imperial Chinese Army. Mulan disguises herself as a man and joins the army in her father's stead, where—with the help of Mushu, a former family guardian spirit—she slowly endears herself to her superiors through her unorthodox way of problem-solving. However, after her gender is revealed, she is discharged by Captain Li Shang, but when she manages to save the Emperor's palace, she is celebrated by everyone in the empire and offered a

position in the Emperor's council, which she declines, electing instead to return to her family. After realising he has romantic feelings for her, Li Shang follows her, and it is strongly implied that they are to get married and live happily ever after.

This paper provides a postcolonial reading of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) that attempts to unveil the embedded colonial gaze by which the East continues to be regarded in contemporary Western media and the unbalanced power dynamics at play in the West's adaptation of "Oriental" cultural texts. Thus, the paper investigates how the structure, iconography, animation style, and soundtrack of the film are employed to frame the Otherness of the story and the characters while still aligning the protagonist and the audience with Western cultural values, especially with respect to the themes of individualism and gender roles.

Theoretical Framework: Orientalism at the Age of Disney Princesses

As conceptualised by Edward Said, Orientalism is a discourse that first and foremost seeks to gain power over the East by discussing and portraying it (10). Orientalism, thus, is not concerned with any actual or authentic portrayals of the East and its inhabitants. Rather, it becomes a "Western projection" and a lens through which the West (Self) defines and *orients* itself in relation to the East (Other) by constructing the two in opposition to each other (Said 95). Such a binary mode of thinking is essentialist in nature, classifying cultures as Western or non-Western. This does not only ignore that a singular culture is never homogenous in the first place, but it may even gloss over any

cultural differences between different Eastern nations, cultures, and races. Said's seminal book mainly focuses on works written at the prime of the British and French Empires to argue that fiction is often deeply intertwined with politics as they often shaped public discourses and helped further the imperial project. However, in the contemporary era of diversity missions and calls for better representation, Orientalism has not died out. Rather, instead of explicitly racial language, it has simply taken on different, more subtle forms in today's increasingly globalised world. The West's fascination with all that is exotic and Other has only been furthered by technological advancements that made Eastern and other geographically and culturally distant cultures more accessible than ever to a Western audience.

This has coincided with the calls for more inclusion and representation of minorities in media, which the hegemonic Western culture has gradually accepted. Yet, this has only led to a different problem, with inauthentic token representations that often do more harm than good. Diversity and Otherness have come to be seen only as entertainment to liven up the white, Western *status quo*. As bell hooks argues, "the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" and, thus, this Otherness is reduced to nothing but "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). However, rather than questioning the *status quo* by spotlighting the possibility of other ways of life, this capitalist consumption often encourages a false sense of intimacy between the viewer and racial Otherness by appealing to their fantasies of exotic or primitive faraway places. Therefore, it only leads to "a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed" (Said 33).

The paradox is that in order to be commercially profitable, such representations must always anticipate the Western viewer's reception. Consequently, they almost inevitably end up diluting all traces of difference and Otherness in the adapted story in order not to stray too far from the Western audience's expectations of how a story must be structured or how certain cultural codes are to be presented. This is often achieved in two ways. The first is by reducing the adapted culture to a mere aesthetic or a backdrop to tell tales that are, at heart, Western structurally, thematically, and semiotically. The second is by adhering to the same tropes, codes, and stereotypes that the audience has come to expect, while maintaining the guise of providing an accurate representation of the culture in question. Calls to diversify the fields of children's media and fairy tales have often fallen into the same traps. Even though the arena of fairy tales in popular culture, and especially Disney's repertoire, remains predominantly white/Western, the 1990s saw an uptick in the number of films that drew upon non-Western cultures, namely *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and finally *Mulan* (1998). Despite becoming a box office hit and a Disney classic that led to the inclusion of Mulan into the franchise of Disney princesses despite not being a royal, *Mulan* (1998) has since come into question for its questionable at best representation of the folk legend's cultural and racial identity.

Mulan Goes to the U.S.

The Disney film is based on "The Ballad of Mulan," which is an anonymous poem believed to be the earliest record of the folk legend, originating in the Northern Wei dynasty between the 4th and 6th century. The dynasty was founded by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei, a proto-Mongol ethnic group (Dong 55). This would ironically render Mulan ethnically closer to the Huns, another nomadic Central Asian ethnic group, who are

portrayed in Disney's film as the main villains, rather than the Han Chinese she has come to be associated with both in China and abroad. The poem contains many details that point to its Xianbei legacy; The ballad opens with Mulan weeping in front of her loom as the Khan's summons to war arrive. As "[her] father had no first-born son" (qtd. in Dong 54), Mulan dons male clothing and goes to war in his place. At the end of her outstanding 12-year service, Mulan is offered the prestigious position of a minister in the Khan's cabinet, but she turns down the Khan's offer, electing instead to return home to her family. Rather than extolling the call to arms, the ballad depicts the realities of life under frequent invasions and political instability. However, Mulan's story gradually adapts a more jingoistic tone in subsequent retellings.

Notably, the trans-cultural adaptation¹ of Mulan by an American corporation is far from being the first time Mulan's story has been assimilated into a majority culture. Even in its homeland, the story of Mulan has been subject to numerous appropriations. Beginning as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), retelling of the folk legend started focusing on Mulan's patriotism as a loyal "imperial subject" (Guo Maoqian, qtd. in Dong 63), which slowly paved the way for her metamorphosis into a Han icon of patriotism. It was the 20th century, however, that saw the most drastic shift in the representation of Mulan, with the legend figuring prominently in nationalistic productions. An example of that is the film *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) which was released during the Second Sino-Japanese War as "a thinly veiled vehicle to express contemporary political concerns" and to boost the public's morale (Wang 7). Thus, it might be tempting to consider the American retelling of the tale as nothing but one additional riff on a palimpsestic text which has experienced innumerable revisions. After

all, the 1998 film superficially follows the plot of the legend—while adding certain elements like a love interest, a talking animal sidekick, and a gender reveal as a plot device to approximate the Disney formula. Yet, the Americanisation of Mulan extends beyond mere additions of plot points and instead turns it into a story that is structurally, thematically, linguistically, and ideologically Western.

Disney's retelling notably strips the tale of any concrete cultural or historical context, electing instead to domesticate the tale into the more familiar—to the intended Western audience, at least—Disney fairy tale structure. The story is fleshed out via the addition of details, episodes, and characters not found in previous iterations of the legend. Mulan's disastrous meeting with the matchmaker, for instance, follows the pattern of the "beauty contest" in fairy tales, in which beauty is regarded as "a girl's most valuable asset" (Lieberman 385-6). Mulan is thus singled out as being the least poised of all the girls that day, delaying the reward of attaining her happily ever after until the end of the movie. This scene culminates in the song "Reflection," which follows Broadway's stable "I Want" song formula, commonly found in other Disney productions, in which the narrative pauses until the main character, who is usually a young female, describes what she desires most in life (Laird 34). The story's main conflict shifts to stem from Mulan's inability to strike a balance between adhering to her Chinese culture's patriarchal values and views of acceptable femininity and staying true to herself by carving out her own path in life. She later manages to achieve this by fighting in the war against the even more representationally Othered barbarian hordes of dark-skinned and golden-eyed Huns (see *fig. 1*), which both echoes the thematics found in American pro-war movies as well as the still-ongoing negative stereotyping of

Central Asians which paradoxically functions as an assertion that "the Orient is at bottom something [...] to be feared" (Said 301). Mulan is thus turned from a filial daughter who joins the war effort to spare her

old father, into a tomboyish misfit who joins the war not only to save her father but more importantly to prove her worth and assert her individuality.



Fig. 1: Shan Yu, the leader of the Huns

Only after embarking on her own quest for individuality is Mulan rewarded with finding love. The film marks a departure from the fairy tale structure in which the heroine passively awaits her Prince Charming. It is only after asserting her individuality and proving herself as a resourceful warrior that the male love interest confesses his love for her, an undoubtedly progressive feminist message to deliver. Nonetheless, this progressive message is hampered by the Orientalist gaze that permeates the film. Zhuoyi Wang likens this attitude to the imperialist European agenda that sought to "[save] brown women from brown men," even if such an agenda was not carried out through an actual white love interest (Spivak qtd. in Wang 2). Instead, it is the Western values of independence and individualism that symbolically serve this role of the "savior whisking away this imagined ancient Chinese girl from her own repressive culture" as they free Mulan from her patriarchal and backwards societal values (Wang 2). In other words, the film's (white) feminism exclusively associates the backwardness and gender oppression with

Mulan's non-Western culture, while distancing itself from any such offences. The result is an inherently Western narrative that sees its values as universal and exclusively regards Mulan's Chinese-ness as a hinderance that stops her fulfilment of her true self.

In addition to being ideologically Western, the film is an American product linguistically and tonally. The script is domesticated to a great extent and is full of American idiomatic expressions and culturally specific puns, and such "domestications of the exotic" make the film more accessible to the average American viewership (Said 60). For instance, to persuade Mulan to let him accompany her, the talking dragon Mushu tells her "I'm travel size for your convenience" (00:28:29–31), and when her prideful demeanour almost reveals their identities, he laments what happens is "all because miss man decides to take her little drag show on the road" (00:24:42–46). Whereas most of the plot-driving dialogue is linguistically distanced from the characters' Chinese-ness, the language sometimes shifts to remind the

viewer of the foreignness of the story. On a superficial level, the film's script contains some linguistic Chinese markings, such as the occasional inclusion of foreign-sounding idiomatic expressions. Nonetheless, many such idioms are in fact unidiomatic for a Chinese viewer and were subsequently absent in the film's Mandarin dub (Tian and Xiong 868-870). Two such examples are the Emperor's statement that "a single grain of rice can tip the scale" (00:02:55-58) and the grandmother's prayers to the ancestors, which were both changed in the dubbing process. In short, all the plot-driving dialogue is domesticated, and the Chinese influences are only used—often inaccurately—to stress the foreignness of the story's origin.

Another marking of ethnicity is the character's names which retain the Chinese naming order in which the surname is given before the first name. Like the idioms, however, the names only serve as a superficial shortcut to denote the story's origins. Mulan's name is itself an interesting case of hybridisation. Known in Mandarin as *Huā Mùlán*, the film elects to use the Cantonese pronunciation of her surname "Fa" while retaining both the Mandarin pronunciation and *pīnyīn*² spelling of her first name. The conflation of two mutually unintelligible Sinitic languages points to the film's homogenising attitude towards its source culture, which becomes subject to a "sensory consumption" that does not go beyond a superficial enjoyment of its Otherness (Ma 150). In other words, the Asian-ness of the story is relegated to being a matter of pure aesthetics without providing any actual, nuanced representation of difference inherent in such a heterogenous society.

The Aesthetics of Diversity

The film brims with an amalgam of Chinese iconographies and motifs which do not hold upon closer inspection. For instance, the

sections of the Great Wall of China, which prominently feature in the film as the final frontier against the Huns' invasion, were not completed until the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), centuries after her story supposedly took place. This is not to say that the film is situated at a clear moment in history; the setting of the film is left ambiguously open, with allusions to an unspecified Chinese dynasty. Ironically, even the film's numerous mentions of "China" itself is anachronistic, as the proclamation that "the Huns have invaded China" (00:14:39) presumes the existence of a unified country, which was not the case for most of modern-day China's history—nor is it the case within the storyworld of the film. This attitude towards Chinese culture regards it as possessing an unchangeable essence that is "both 'historical' since it goes back to the dawn of history, and fundamentally a-historical" since it is not interested in examining the historical evolution of the culture (Said 97). Just as the film opens with the Great Wall, it ends with depictions of the Forbidden City, which is predominantly draped in red and adorned with traditional Chinese lanterns and fireworks. Crucially, however, the impetus for this is not historical accuracy but rather denoting the Chinese-ness of the setting through the use of visual shortcuts.

Similarly, this preoccupation with having only the most superficial markers of Chinese-ness to underscore the foreignness of the story is evident in how the film abounds with dragon motifs. Instead of the name of the dynasty on the flag, only a dragon is depicted as the only marker of the ethnicity of the soldiers, who are later shown firing dragon-shaped cannons at their enemies (00:14:30; 00:54:08). Even the Fa family's emblem is a dragon, depicted in their dragon-shaped incense burner and gong-ringer, which is later anthropomorphised into Mulan's talking sidekick Mushu, named after an Asian-American fusion Pork dish

(Ma 149). This is a far cry from the elevated position that dragons occupied in traditional Chinese society, which came to associate the dragon with emperors, who were believed to be the bearers of the mandate of heaven and were, therefore, almost deified (Wilson 305). This is only briefly alluded to in the dragon pendant bestowed by the Emperor on Mulan near the end. In other words, the film's main strategy is to use Chinese symbols that would unambiguously highlight the culture's foreignness by referencing stereotypical but accessible "cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media," while still making them as palatable and non-threatening as possible by stripping them of any true cultural significance (Said 325). This causes the setting and the entire culture to become little more than an aesthetic.

Stylistically if not meaningfully, the film does go to great lengths to provide an "authentic" audio-visual representation of the culture from which the story is adapted. However, a close reading of how those Chinese elements are interposed within Disney's usual Western audio-visual style proves that such attempts at cultural authenticity, and the choice of scenes in which they emerge, only further the Othering

message of the film, which begins in the first few seconds of it. The now-iconic castle and Walt Disney logo appear, orienting the viewers' expectations and signalling that what they are about to watch is a Disney narrative (00:00:02–15). Afterwards, the screen fades to black then opens on a beige background with black calligraphic tracings reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink paintings on rice paper. The animation continues the calligraphic depictions of mountains, trees, and clouds—all traditional subjects of Chinese paintings—until it culminates in a calligraphic portrayal of the Great Wall of China. During this sequence, the words "Walt Disney Presents" appear in an unmarked font, then they fade to make way for the title of the film, "Mulan", in a much more stylised typeface and underlined by a dragon in a gold-accented red (see *fig. 2*). The calligraphy then morphs into a more realistic depiction of the Wall in Disney's more realistic animation style, and it is only after this shift into the more contemporary style that the narrative proper begins (00:00:15–00:01:4). The opening sequence thus signals the setting of the film, but the stylised Oriental animation style is quickly discarded as the animation reverts to the more familiar realistic Disney style.



Fig. 2: The opening scene showing the film's title in a stylised font on a background reminiscent of rice paper.

The Otherness of the tale is further framed by the choice of music. The opening sequence is accompanied by sweeping orchestral music from Jerry Goldsmith's score, with a vaguely Chinese-sounding musical phrase, which is later repeated at various points during the film. Notably, rather than being accurate representation of traditional Chinese music, those ethnically marked tracks only invoke what an American audience would recognise as Oriental-sounding music by relying on pentatonic scales and other musical phrases that are easily recognisable as Asian (Scoggin 201). Yet, rather than using culturally specific musical instruments to produce the music, a Western symphony was employed as a means of remaining palatable to a Western audience; the score is only ethnically Asian inasmuch as the American public considers it thus. On the other hand, other musical tracks and songs are purely Western in style, but the choice to use one or the other is not an arbitrary one. Rather, music—along with the animation style—is often used to signal and assert the binary opposition between East and West, and to enforce the film's own (Western) moral message by giving "an already pronounced evaluative judgment" on the East simply via "its very designation [...] as Oriental" (Said 207).

(White) Feminism and Gender Representations

Unsurprisingly, a film premised on the cross-dressing of a woman to enter war, the arena of men, is fertile ground for the exploration of feminist and gendered issues. However, exploring such issues while the story is embedded in a different culture, often with different gendered codes than those of the adapting culture, considerably complicates the process. This is especially the case when the adapted culture is an Oriental one, which has long been subject to a Western "male power fantasy" and a gaze that continuously feminised it by fixating on its "separateness,

its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (Said 206-7). Therefore, the analysis of the depictions of Asian gender, whether feminine or masculine, is never a "separate [discourse]" from that of racism, since the two are "[m]utually constitutive, [...] drawing their discursive legibility and social power in relation to one another" (Eng 2). In other words, the codes by which the film produces its feminist message are also highly racialised ones that set the Chinese culture and the Western one in a binary opposition that clearly favours the latter.

Music and animation are used to reflect the high expectations placed on women in Chinese society and Mulan's inability to fit into this mould. One notable example in which the two revert to a more stylised Orientalism akin to the opening segment is the song "Honor to Us All," which occurs early in the movie. In it, Mulan is prepared for her meeting with the matchmaker and transformed into a beautiful, if awkward, bride. Lyrically, the song describes the great expectations placed on women in their society to bring honour to her family "by striking a good match" (00:07:01–6). The women also sing about the desired traits in brides-to-be, namely physical beauty, obedience, calm, and the bearing of sons. Ironically, these are the very adjectives by which the Orient has come to be regarded in Orientalist writing and art: "passive, seminal, feminine, even silent and supine" (Said 138). Nevertheless, the film distances itself from such binary thinking by stressing the Otherness of those regressive gender roles, both on a visual and aural level. First, the texture of the background for most of the song is especially soft and painting-like, especially as Mulan's hair and makeup are prepared in front of a folding screen with an Oriental pattern. Second, the music is also markedly non-Western; the main melody of

the song is built upon a repetition of the same pentatonic musical phrase heard in the opening scene, which is further stressed via the mostly monosyllabic lyrics that mimic the cadence of Chinese. By exclusively aligning the East semiotically with gender repressiveness, the film perpetuates the stereotype of the oppressed and submissive Oriental woman, while failing to acknowledge its own role in such (forced) narrative submission.

By contrast, the animation and music during Mulan's own song, "Reflection," exclusively aligns her with Western culture. After her failed meeting with the matchmaker, Mulan sings about her two competing desires for a more authentic existence that reflects who she truly is and for not upsetting her family. While the background is likewise depicted in hazy pastels as Mulan walks around her house's garden with its moon gate and cherry blossoms, Mulan herself is clearly outlined, which makes her stand out from her surroundings. This provides a visual metaphor for the sense of unbelonging that Mulan expresses via the lyrics. Musically, the song's melody is exclusively Western, lacking any Oriental motifs except briefly when she mentions her fear of disappointing her family's expectations. The juxtaposition between the two songs asserts the binary opposition between two cultural traditions, in which the Eastern one appears "symmetrical to, and yet diametrically inferior to, a [Western] equivalent" (Said 72). The viewer

is thus encouraged to sympathise with Mulan—who is Western in spirit if not in skin colour—when she awkwardly flounders under the pressure of her society.

This Oriental stylisation is repeated in "A Girl Worth Fighting For," the song that Mulan's battalion sings while marching off to war. Instead of thinking of the horrors of war that await them, the soldiers decide to "think of instead / A girl worth fighting for" (00:47:54–00:48:00). The characteristics of the girl of their dreams notably mirror those in "Honor to Us All," a connection which is made even stronger via the repetition of similar musical phrases, even when they are accompanied by a more masculine melody that resembles march-style music with its heavy percussion (Scoggin 201). This is visually accompanied by another shift in the animation style. Ling, one of the soldiers, unfolds a scroll containing a painting of his vision of the perfect bride. The painting, which is done in a heavily Oriental style, depicts a woman with heavy makeup reminiscent of that of Mulan and the other brides during the matchmaker scene (see *fig. 3*). Her face is partially hidden behind a folding fan, with Chinese writing to the left of the painting. The camera then zooms in and enters the painting, which becomes animated and shows the soldiers describing and interacting with their ideal woman. The colouring and texture of this scene recalls the calligraphic opening scene, which likewise serves to stress that such misogyny is the product of a different, non-Western culture.



Fig. 3: Painting of Ling's ideal bride.

Li Shang's training song, "I'll Make a Man Out of You" lyrically echoes the binary conception of gender roles in the soldiers' song, but it considerably complicates the film's representation of masculinity. In the song, Li Shang explains to his trainees the characteristics of a good soldier and expresses his doubts in their ability to attain the required level of strength. The song's title and lyrics explicitly equate manliness with strength, while associating womanhood with weakness and, therefore, inferiority. Li Shang ironically questions, for example: "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?" when Mulan, disguised as the male soldier Ping, fails to keep up with the rigorous training (00:38:13–20). Nonetheless, near the end of the training montage, Mulan is portrayed as beginning to master the drills through a gradual increase in her physical strength, her use of wit, or a combination of the two. It is, thus, not an innate masculinity that the song espouses, but a specific performance of it.

If Mulan masters this performance of masculinity via wit and stubborn determination, it comes naturally to Li Shang, who later becomes Mulan's love interest. Visually, Li Shang is set apart from the others through his hypermasculinity, which represents a "a very narrow conception" of Asian masculinity that ultimately "reinforces white male patriarchal hegemony with [its] bid for an Asian American martial masculinity" (Nguyen 4). Before the song starts, he is depicted taking off his shirt in a low camera angle, and the scene then cuts to Mulan to show her astonished expression (00:36:35–00:36:50). Throughout the song, the gaze also lingers on Li Shang's bare, muscled chest as he easily demonstrates heroic feats of strength. Crucially, he is clearly portrayed through Mulan's own female gaze, and the viewer is accordingly encouraged to adopt her own point of view (McCallum 123-4). The song

also differs musically from the soldiers' song in its lack of Oriental-sounding musical motifs, and the animation style is likewise significantly non-Oriental throughout the song. These are two signs that come to be associated with the film's own moral compass, indicating that Li Shang's (hyper)masculinity is more acceptable than the others'.

On the other hand, the other male characters do not fare as well as Li Shang, falling instead into the other Western trope of the Asian man: that of the feminised, effeminate one. One notable example is the character of Chi-Fu, the Emperor's advisor. On the one hand, he represents all the patriarchal values that stand in the way of Mulan, and he is thus relegated to the role of a secondary villain that believes "she will never be worth anything" by virtue of being a woman (01:15:30–39). Nevertheless, he paradoxically also represents the "feminization of the Asian male" in American popular culture, which often saw the Asian (American) male body "racially stereotyped in ways that placed him within a subservient or dependent gender category" (Chen 60). This is evident in Chi-Fu's character design and stylisation. He is short, slender, and with only a few wispy strands of facial hair as opposed to the Emperor's imposing figure and long beard, which are all suggestive of a lack of virility for the former. In one scene, he goes to bathe at the camp and is shown clad in a dress-like towel that he suggestively clings to, with a smaller towel wrapped around his head. He denies that he "squeal[s] like a girl" (00:46:53–57). Seconds later, he screams after being startled by a panda. His most notable symbolic emasculation occurs when the Emperor offers Mulan a position on the council and even suggests that she replace Chi-Fu as the Emperor's personal advisor. Chi-Fu, with his tattered hat that limply hangs over his face, proceeds to faint. Even as she refuses the

offer and chooses to return home to her family, Mulan is thus presented as having symbolically defeated the effeminate Chi-Fu.

The soldiers Ling, Chien-Po, and Yao are likewise given certain feminine traits. Their character designs are all a far cry from Li Shang's effortless masculinity; Ling, for example, is still feminised via his smaller body size and high-pitched voice despite his chauvinism, and Chien-Po is soft-spoken with a peaceful, agreeable personality despite his larger build. While they are not presented as negatively as Chi-Fu, they are nonetheless shown to be subservient not only to Li Shang but even to Mulan herself. Near the end of the film, the three soldiers—led by Mulan—must disguise themselves as imperial concubines to attempt to enter the sieged palace and rescue the Emperor. Ironically, Li Shang is the only one who does not partake in this act of cross-dressing, remaining comfortably

instead in his male clothing and hypermasculinity (01:09:54–57). The three soldiers' makeover visually mirrors Mulan's own two transformations earlier in the film, first as she is prepared to meet the matchmaker, then as she dons her soldier's garments and crosses over into masculinity. Yet, this border crossing is depicted in a much more stylised manner that is “parodic of a drag act and a striptease” in which the soldiers suggestively pose and move as if dancing or flaunting their ambiguous gender (McCallum 127). Moreover, the scene is soundtracked by an orchestral reprise of “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” with the refrain “Be a man” coinciding with a shot of three fans that open up to reveal the three of them in heavy makeup and traditionally feminine clothing (see *fig. 4*). This juxtaposition between the visual and audio signs thus highlights that they are anything but “a man.”



Fig. 4: The soldier's disguise as imperial concubines.

That being said, while the scene is obviously a comedic one, it does not descend into complete caricature; the soldiers do manage to stop the invasion and save the Emperor's life, and they are not derided for donning their female disguises to do so, nor are they shown to be embarrassed about it. This might suggest the possibility of an intermediary, hybrid position that “recover[s] a cultural space without denigrating or erasing “the feminine” by transcending the

restrictive traditional gender binaries altogether (Cheung 242). Nonetheless, this possibility is undermined by the film's reluctance to completely eschew gender norms altogether. While Mulan symbolically defeats Chi-Fu, her role in defeating the main villain, Shan Yu, is only a limited one, with the final blow being relegated to Mushu. In other words, she is only shown to defeat Chi-Fu because it is “acceptable for Mulan to triumph over him since he is already

feminized, unlike the hyper-masculine villain, Shan Yu” (Dundes and Streiff 5). The message is further undermined by Mulan’s return to those self-same gender roles with the film ending on the promise of a happily ever after between the two lovers—even if this is partially in accordance with the *Ballad*, in which she returns home to her family and her femininity. Ironically, the addition of a romance subplot between Mulan and Li Shang in the film—which is crucially not present in the *Ballad*—to further approximate the Disney fairy tale formula further cements Mulan’s return to the gender roles that the film heavily criticises as being both outdated and strictly “Oriental.”

However, even this attempted, albeit incomplete, subversion of gender binaries brings about the solidification of another set of binary opposites. The soldiers, following Mulan’s lead, successfully defeat the Huns and reclaim the imperial palace; then, the Emperor, the ultimate patriarch of the empire, bows to Mulan, now back in her feminine costuming, and the rest of the citizens present follow suit by kneeling (01:16:25–51). The scene obviously carries a clear feminist message, with Mulan singlehandedly changing her society’s unfavourable views on the limits of a woman’s capabilities to achieve greatness. Such a narrative choice thus depicts “the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption” (Said 206). This redemption is brought about by Disney’s *Mulan*, who is not simply a Chinese woman. Rather, she is a character who has been exclusively allied throughout the film not with the Chinese culture but with the Western one through various semiotic signs. Consequently, this act of bowing takes a second, more worrying meaning; it no longer becomes a representation of the patriarchy bowing to a woman, but of an entire culture—with its men and women—bowing to another.

During the final confrontation before freeing the Emperor, Mulan manages to disarm the antagonist, Shan-Yu, using nothing but a paper folding fan (01:14:20–31). The use of the fan recalls two earlier scenes in which the same symbol figures prominently: the soldier’s crossdressing scene and Mulan’s meeting with the matchmaker in which she uses her fan to distract the latter in order to cheat and later to try to put out the fire she causes. Linking the fan to those two particular scenes renders it a symbol of femininity. Therefore, the message, it is suggested, is that femininity and strength are not mutually exclusive, as Mulan is able to defeat Shan-Yu’s sword using her strength, wit, and a traditionally feminine symbol. However, this binary only holds true from an exclusively Western perspective; in China, the folding fan was historically associated with male literati and only transformed into a feminine accessory in the Early Republican period (Rado 198). Such a transformation in China, crucially, was in part triggered by the West’s own Orientalising appropriations and photographic depictions of the folding fan as a symbol for exotic Asian feminine allure (202).

Another equally iconic scene is when Mulan is shown shortening her hair using her father’s sword before putting it up in a topknot and riding off to war to save her father (00:18:49–00:19:01), even though the cutting off of one’s hair was extremely frowned upon in Confucian teachings and was deemed to be unfilial (qtd. in De Bary and Bloom 326). The shift towards shorter hair for men likewise occurred under the influence of the West as a means of modernising the country, especially after the fall of the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) that mandated the long queue hairstyle (Sun 354). The two aforementioned scenes are both striking and memorable, and they undoubtedly give a strong feminist message

to young girls, towards whom the film is mainly directed. However, what they also have in common is how they exemplify the most glaring issue of adapting a story steeped in a different cultural and literary tradition by a more dominant culture; this feminist message is only reached at best by reducing the culture from which the folk legend hails to nothing but a prop in what is, at heart, a Western tale directed towards a Western audience, and at worst by setting it up as a foil to all the progressive ideals of Western culture.

Conclusion

Mulan (1998) is a prime example of the unbalanced power dynamics at play when Disney and other corporations tell stories from outside their own Western cultural sphere. Disney's adaptation is another addition to a long list of adaptations which drew upon the folk legend; it transposes the story to the American pop cultural sphere—even while maintaining the Chinese setting—which leads to many structural, thematic, and ideological changes. This iteration of the tale closely follows the conventions of the modern Disney fairy tale, and its script and language are mostly domesticated to a great extent for an American audience, except when the film chooses to signal the foreignness and Otherness of the culture, usually to contrast it with Western ideals of progressivism and equality. Turning *Mulan*'s story from that of a filial daughter sparing her father from the horrors of war into that of an individualist who attains her individuality by joining the war ideologically aligns *Mulan* with Western culture. Nonetheless, the film maintains a Chinese aesthetic throughout via the use of iconography, names, music, and animation style. Those however are either historically or culturally inaccurate, or they serve to underscore the binary opposition between the adapted and the adapting cultures and to signal the superiority of the latter.

This is most obvious in the film's treatment of its feminist message and its representation of gender roles. Asian-sounding musical scales and a stylised Oriental-like animation style are often used in scenes that tackle the high expectations placed on Chinese women, who are shown to be both submissive and subservient to men, thereby signalling the inferiority of this culture but also implicitly perpetuating the same stereotypes of Asian women in the Western mediasphere. Furthermore, with the exception of Li Shang's hypermasculinity, the vast majority of the other Chinese male characters fall into another stereotype prevalent in American media: that of the emasculated, feminised man that cannot compete with the wit and resourcefulness of the women who are Western in everything but skin colour. Thus, this adaptation raises many questions regarding the ethics of trans-cultural adaptation and what constitutes good diversity in media representation. Films produced by a media giant that is owned by and caters to a Western, white majority will always be implicated in the consumption of other cultures. Yet, a better understanding of this power unbalance at the heart of such films may eventually allow them to move beyond token representation of racial minorities for representations' sake—while often perpetuating the same stereotypes they claim to challenge—into more authentic representations that acknowledge the heterogeneity of other cultures and do not merely use them as tools to orient the West towards defining itself.

Notes

¹ In its broadest sense, the term “trans-cultural adaptation” could be defined as any adaptation that crosses national, temporal, linguistic, cultural, or even gendered borders (Hutcheon 145-147)

² *Hànyǔ pīnyīn*, or *pīnyīn* for short, is the official romanisation system used for Standard Mandarin, the official language of China.

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