Chapter 12

Mulan (1998) and Hua Mulan (2009)
National Myth and Trans-Cultural Intertextuality

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The myth of Mulan, an ordinary woman who serves in the army disguised as a man in her enfeebled father’s place and becomes a hero, has undergone subtle yet significant changes throughout Chinese history when Mulan emerges from layers of narratives as the quintessential woman warrior after centuries of retelling and reinterpretation in literary and visual texts. The most recent cinematic re-imagination of Mulan is the Chinese live action film Hua Mulan 花木兰 by Jingle Ma 马楚成 from 2009, but its representation of a national myth demands transnational interpretation because of Disney’s globally popular Mulan (1998) franchise, directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Between Disney’s immensely popular animation Mulan and China’s live action film Hua Mulan 花木兰, the Mulan narrative’s migration to Hollywood and back to China creates a delta of trans-cultural intertextuality where the understanding of these transnational film texts is triangulated by gender, political, and social discourses. This chapter argues that Disney’s Mulan homogenizes the Chinese heroine with its gallery of Disney princesses in order to reinforce the studio’s leadership in global popular culture production and maintain a long tradition of the celebration of personal growth, individualism, and independent spirit. By contrast, Hua Mulan is a transnational discourse that expresses an accentuated national patriotism that harks back to China’s peaceful rise in foreign policy. The portrayal of a remarkably feminized Hua Mulan in Hua Mulan also situates itself within the postfeminist cinematic representation of a new generation of female lead characters, comparable to the heroines in a number of postfeminist films that become prominent in contemporary Chinese cinema.

Disney’s Mulan and the Chinese film Hua Mulan complete a two-way conversation on the same subject matter. While Mulan appropriates a Chinese legend to
reinforce its own popular cultural globalization and homogenization, *Hua Mulan* de-Disneyfies Mulan by inscribing a politicized discourse of national patriotism. If, as Joseph Chan argues (2002), *Mulan* Disneyfies and Westernizes a Chinese legend through a process by which “one culture is transformed by another in their mutual encounters,” then *Hua Mulan* is the transformed Chinese culture’s attempt to “take back one of its own [cultural legacies].” These two films potentialize a cross-cultural cinematic dialogue on gender, politics, and representation, mediated by different re-constructions of the Mulan narrative.

During this textual migration, the trafficking of the Mulan narrative leaves behind traces of border crossing. These traces infiltrate each film by creating a multilayered text. What makes a comparative analysis of Disney’s *Mulan* and China’s *Hua Mulan* particularly significant is precisely this textual boundary crossing that blurs the difference between the original and the remake. Just as Lan Dong suggests (2011), the tale of Mulan becomes palimpsestic, which refers to a written record that retains different layers of re-writing, with each layer visible and superimposed on top of the others. If Disney’s *Mulan* is a politicized remake of the original Chinese ballad, then the Chinese *Hua Mulan* is no less a culturally coded remake that has its own gender and political agendas. But who is Hua Mulan? How does her story become a vehicle for a Confucian moral teaching and an example for national patriotism? What bridges the historical, cultural, and aesthetic gaps between a sixth-century Chinese folk tale and a contemporary American animation film? How does trans-cultural intertextuality transform the production and consumption of the Mulan films?

### The History of the Hua Mulan Myth

Everything we know about Hua Mulan as a fictionalized historical figure comes from the first literary text about Mulan, the “Ballad of Mulan” (*木兰辞 Mulan ci*), which was circulated in the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China (420–589 AD). In this well-known *yuefu* 乐府 ballad in 14 stanzas, Mulan is depicted as an ordinary young woman who rises under extraordinary circumstances in order to spare her father the hardship and danger of fighting in the war. Mulan decides to serve in the army when she learns that her elderly father has been conscripted to fight against foreign invaders. She disguises herself as a man to take her father’s place in the army and fights bravely in battles for ten years. When Mulan returns after the victory, she turns down the emperor’s offer of a high official position so that she can return home and resume her life as an ordinary woman. After Mulan dons her old clothes, she presents herself as a female to startled fellow soldiers, who are all shocked that Mulan’s secret has never been revealed during so many years of living in close quarters.

The long history of the Mulan narrative epitomizes trans-cultural intertextuality because it sustains numerous textual and cultural variations. In China, the story of Hua Mulan has been constantly re-written almost immediately after the earliest written account. Intellectuals from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) to
contemporary China retell the Mulan story in poems, dramatic plays, novels, and picture books.\(^8\) Mulan’s adventure has also become a popular source for theatrical and cinematic adaptations, through which Mulan “has evolved into an ideal heroine during a lengthy process of storytelling and retelling.”\(^9\) Hua Mulan’s narrative enjoyed international fame when Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* adopted this Chinese folk legend in her fictional autobiography of an aspiring Asian American woman in 1975.\(^10\) But it is Disney’s hugely successful animation *Mulan* in 1998 that has maximized Hua Mulan’s transnational iconic status as “the most recognized Chinese folktale heroine in the world.”\(^11\)

Each of these accounts of Hua Mulan’s story adds enriching and complicating layers to the Hua Mulan corpus, by which I refer to the collective textual and visual reiterations of her tale. Although all of these variations contain a similar basic structural framework that centers on a young woman who impersonates a man to fight in the war in her father’s place and returns home to resume her female identity, each reproduction of the tale varies for historical, social, ideological, moral, gender, and political reasons.\(^12\) In addition, each recount of the Mulan story is inevitably contextualized by previous retellings, and each in turn exerts influence over later versions of the Mulan narrative. Therefore, the trans-cultural, multi-media, intra- and international re-configurations of the Hua Mulan motif make the titular heroine a hybrid character, in the sense that no single account of the female heroine can claim authority over the others, because there is “no greater mistake than to assume that these stories embody a single, unchanging, essential meaning.”\(^13\)

Just as Zhe Wang, co-producer of Jingle Ma’s *Hua Mulan*, vividly describes, the Hua Mulan story is an “entertainment aircraft carrier,” which refers to its powerhouse entertainment value and its enabling capacity that inspired multiple renditions of the story.\(^14\) Yet despite centuries of reinterpretation and re-writings in varies expressive forms, Hua Mulan emerges as a heroic figure in the Chinese imagination that epitomizes patriotism, Confusion filial piety, and virtue.

The original Mulan ballad may sustain a feminist interpretation on surface level, but careful examination reveals otherwise. Its famous last two lines use a humorous but eloquent metaphor to express natural gender equality between men and women:

> “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? 雄兔脚扑朔，雌兔眼迷离。双兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌?”\(^{15}\)

Through Mulan’s own words, the ballad acknowledges the biological differences between the male and female hares, since the male hare’s feet “go hip and skip” when it is picked up, and the female hare’s eyes “are muddled and fuddled.” But more significantly, the poem ends Mulan’s story with a rhetorical question that tells its own answer: when both the male and the female hares are put together on the ground, their differences are unrecognizable. Contextualized within Mulan’s own experience of fighting in the war disguised as a man and concealing her female identity to fellow soldiers, this ending is both a proud remark on a personal level, congratulating herself on her own capability and resourcefulness, and also a general observation on gender equality, implying that there is no essentializing difference between genders.

It must come to our attention that Mulan’s articulation of gender equality is always historicized and politicized. If the historical figure Hua Mulan originally
lived in the northern tribes as an ethnic minority woman, horse-back riding and basic military knowledge would be common acquisitions among the tribe women due to constant wars along China’s northern borders prior to the Northern Wei dynasty, when the ballad takes its literary form. In addition, there would not have been as inviolable a differentiation between masculine and feminine social division of responsibilities as in the heavily Confucian ethnic Han community, which emphasized men’s outward duties and women’s domestic confinement. Hence, Mulan’s physical ability to fight as a regular soldier and survive the war would not be so remarkable as an unorthodox achievement as that of a Confucian Han woman. Therefore, Mulan’s possible non-Han ethnicity in the original ballad potentially weakens her story’s feminist implication.

Furthermore, Mulan’s potentially subversive remark on gender equality is carefully neutralized by a disproportionately extravagant description of the reinstatement of her female identity in the ballad. Mulan’s final return to womanhood through changes in her attire and makeup is painstakingly accentuated through an elaborate ritual of re-dressing that takes place in the intimacy of a feminine place: she goes to her old boudoir, sits on her old bed, takes off her soldier’s uniform, puts on her previous dress, fixes her cloud-like hair by the window, and dabs yellow makeup powder on her face. In fact, this ritualistic portrayal is so vivid and thorough that it becomes a prerequisite for Mulan’s concluding speech. By speaking as a beautifully dressed woman, Mulan subtly punctuates her apparent feministic endorsement. Thus, Mulan’s ceremonious feminization also serves as a political disarmament that counterbalances her subversive trespass into the patriarchal society.

Disney’s Animation: A Franchise of Heroism?

Disney’s 1998 animation Mulan brought bankable transnational visuality to this well-known Chinese legendary heroine Hua Mulan. As Disney’s first animated feature that utilizes a Chinese folk tale, Mulan proved to be an immense commercial success, ranking seventh in box office revenue worldwide in 1998. This film owed much impressive popularity to both the original narrative’s translatability and the film’s graceful visualization of the ancient Chinese story. Inspired by Robert D. San Souci’s children’s book Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior (2000) and loosely based on the anonymous sixth-century Chinese ballad Ode of Mulan, Disney’s Mulan captures its titular heroine’s universal appeal: strength, independence, filial piety, and courage. Besides its innovative appropriation of the Chinese tale, Mulan’s exquisite oriental visual style provides a refreshing addition to Disney’s gallery of feisty princesses. Although it is not the first attempt to adapt this Chinese story to the silver screen, Disney’s Mulan is undoubtedly the most successful and popular rendition to date.

The film has a lineal plotline: After Mulan (voice of Ming-Na Wen) disappoints her family in a failed bride interview, she joins the army disguised as a man to take her old and enfeebled father’s place. With the help of a tiny dragon Mushu (Eddie Murphy) and Cri-Kee, a cricket (Frank Welker), Mulan survives in the army and
eventually saves the emperor from the Khan of the invading Huns. She comes home with an eligible bachelor, Captain Li Shang (BD Wong).

Disney’s re-configuration of the Chinese tale permanently changes the original Mulan narrative’s cultural, gender, and political implications. Not only is the black-haired, slant-eyed Mulan an Americanized tomboy who has few of the female virtues that are expected of her in ancient China, she is hailed as a symbol of girl power and feminism by both Western critics and viewers, which are not warranted by the original ballad. Different from the original story’s emphasis on Mulan’s filial piety and patriotism as the primary reason that she fights in the army, Disney uses Mulan’s army experience to represent a journey of self-discovery and personal actualization. In short, Mulan is carefully standardized into a feminist Bildungsroman to cater to the Western audience’s expectation according to Disney’s highly commercialized assembly line production.

The Disney film gives Mulan a formulaic characterization so that she can be easily marketable in the studio’s globalized entertainment economy. While the Mulan narrative is historically politicized in its promotion of patriotism, Disney significantly weakens the story’s connotation of national patriotism by de-politicizing her intention to serve in the army. Mulan presents the heroine’s journey to the battlefield more as a voyage of this free-spirited girl to find her own independent identity, and less as a sacrifice of a filial daughter who willingly goes to war to save her father. Mulan’s unconventional characterization is carefully portrayed in her disastrous interview with the matchmaker. Although she is well groomed and imitates the graceful gait of other brides-to-be, Mulan is depicted as awkward, clumsy, and clueless in her meeting with the matchmaker. Mulan’s personal dilemma is emphatically articulated in her solo song “Reflection”: if she wants to remain true to herself, she cannot bring her family honor (by finding a husband); but if she changes herself so that she can be married, she will lose her own independent identity. Thus, Mulan’s social incompatibility turns her decision to join the army into a Huck Finnish youth adventure. Frontloading such a youthful quest as a universal theme allows Mulan to stay within the working formula of many Disney feature films while still managing to add more diversity to that formula.

Disney’s Mulan perpetuates the Chinese heroine’s international fame through its mass-mediated commercialization of Mulan’s physical look and a narrative recreation of the original poem. Its re-configuration of Mulan’s character and her story in imperial China evokes a mixed feeling among the Chinese audience, critics, and film reviewers. Among more positive reviews and comments, critics seem to agree that the success of Mulan promotes Chinese culture and its literary legacy, as it “reveals Disney’s goodwill toward traditional Chinese culture” and portrays China in an “increasingly favorable light.” Others are rather skeptical about Disney’s intention in adopting the beloved Chinese legend, claiming that it “misreads Chinese tradition and culture” and hegemonically “substitutes Chinese culture with American ideology and value systems.” Just as Stanley Rosen (1999–2000) observes that “Chinese viewers had no difficulty identifying flaws of a cultural and historical nature in the film,” many are quick to point out that Mulan failed to remain faithful to its original story’s historical and cultural background.
Given such a controversial reception of Disney’s Mulan, it is not surprising that when the Beijing-based Starlight International Media Group announced its production of Hua Mulan in 2009, major media outlets in both China and America expressed a rekindled attention to how director Jingle Ma would re-interpret this Chinese legend that had already been visualized many times on screen. People.com (人民网 Renmin Wang), the online version of the official Chinese government’s newspaper People’s Daily, followed the making of Hua Mulan closely throughout its production, promotion, and screening with numerous articles. Hua Mulan’s impressive domestic box office revenue of 45 million Chinese yuan within five days of its premier made it to a news report on December 2, 2009, on China Central Television (CCTV), the most authoritative news broadcast program in China, which praised Hua Mulan’s family-friendly subject and its “pioneering showcasing of national films.” As if following the lead of CCTV, Time magazine published an online article the next day, highlighting the rather competitive dynamics between Chinese cinema and Disney in its title, “China vs. Disney: The Battle for Mulan.” This competition between the Chinese re-imagination of the Mulan story and Disney’s “definitive version of the story,” according to this article, reflects a new trend of a “soft” patriotic propaganda, which “incorporates” more nuanced, entertaining storytelling into patriotic plots.

The Chinese Hua Mulan Narrative

The Chinese film Hua Mulan reclaims its own female hero both culturally and politically. It is one of Hua Mulan’s avowed intentions to “present China’s own Mulan to the world,” as Guo Shu, the executive president of the Beijing-based Starlight International Media Group, one of the film’s investors, is quoted saying in a Time article. Hua Mulan’s cultural authenticity is promised, if not guaranteed, with an undertone of cultural legitimacy in Guo’s statement. Thus, as the newest addition to the gallery of cinematic Mulan narratives, Hua Mulan takes it upon itself not only to be historically accurate and culturally faithful to the story, but also to remediate the historic heroine’s political and gender significance in the Chinese imagination.

Hua Mulan begins with the Northern tribe Rouran’s invasion of the Kingdom of Wei. Hua Mulan (Wei Zhao) decides to join the army to save her father, but it is because of the help of her childhood friend Tiger (小虎, played by Jaycee Chan) that Hua Mulan could live with the soldiers without her identity being revealed. When her true identity is accidentally discovered by Wentai (文泰, played by Kun Chen), the emperor’s third son whose true identity is unknown to everyone, Hua Mulan saves the army in Rouran’s surprise attack and stays in the army. As Hua Mulan advances in ranks due to her bravery and strategy, she is also increasingly attracted to Wentai, who fakes his death in a battle so that Hua Mulan could grow to be a great general without the interference of her personal feelings. Hua Mulan and Wentai reunite with each other only when she is betrayed by the corrupt and jealous commander-in-chief (played by Guangcheng Song) and her army besieged
by the Rouran soldiers. In order to save Hua Mulan and the soldiers, Wentai reveals his true identity to the Rourans and volunteers to serve as their hostage. Hua Mulan eventually kills Danyu (单于, played by Min Xu), Rouran’s king, and saves Wentai, but refuses Wentai’s marriage proposal, because her country and people can enjoy a peaceful life if Wentai marries Rouran’s princess as part of the peace treaty between Wei and Rouran.

Different from Disney’s resort to the universal theme of self-realization to maximize Mulan’s global attraction, Jingle Ma’s Hua Mulan delineates a heroic woman who is fundamentally defined by her self-sacrificing filial piety and patriotism that extends beyond the concept of the Han China. In Ma’s film, Hua Mulan is portrayed as a filial daughter who takes good care of her widowed father. In her entrance scene, Hua Mulan cleverly tricks the reluctant father Hua Hu (Rongguang Yu) into taking his medicine. She brings both the medicine pot and the wine bottle on her tray, and when her father asks to drink wine instead of medicine, she obediently pours him a bowl full of wine. Thinking that he has his daughter’s trick figured out, her father believes that Hua Mulan puts medicine in the wine bottle and asks for the medicine instead, only to discover that both the wine bottle and the medicine pot contain his medicine. This detail reveals Mulan’s deep care and understanding of her father, and a loving concern only a devoted daughter conveys. In spite of the domestic setting of this scene, it foreshadows Mulan’s military education and her quick wit. Simple as it is, the trick involves a thorough knowledge of its target and careful execution, both of which remind us of war strategies. As audience will learn in later scenes, Mulan is an expert in military maneuvers and tactics. Just as one elderly villager in the scene jokingly says, Hua Mulan uses “battle tricks on her father” (see figure 12.1).

In order to accentuate Hua Mulan’s filial piety and self-sacrifice, Ma’s film takes pains to emphasize the heroine’s domesticity and her rather docile submissiveness in the beginning sequence. Compared with a feisty Mulan in the Disney animation, Hua Mulan is rather quiet and inarticulate, behaving in a Confucian manner that

Figure 12.1  Hua Mulan tricks her father into taking his medication using military strategies. A scene from Hua Mulan (2009).
is appropriate for a young and unmarried girl. She never retorts or talks back at her father, even when he complains about her fondness for martial arts in front of the entire village. Hua Mulan’s silence is remarkable because it manifests the Chinese film’s conscious departure from Disney’s Mulan.

Hua Mulan also conspicuously revises the heroine’s characterization in Mulan in later scenes in order to set itself apart from the Disney rendition. While Disney’s Mulan faces a grim future as an unmarriable daughter, Hua Mulan does not have such a problem. On the night before Hua Hu prepares to leave for the army, he tells Hua Mulan that a good marriage has already been arranged for her by a village elder. Not only can she expect to get married soon, Hua Mulan also has some money from her father to help her with the ceremony. Thus, by going to the war, Hua Mulan essentially sacrifices her chance of having her own family and living a normal life in order that her duty as a daughter can be fulfilled. This detail echoes back to the original ballad, where Mulan re-emerges as an eligible woman for marriage at the end.

By re-imagining its own ethnic heroine Hua Mulan, Jingle Ma’s film is both a rejection to the Disney Mulan’s Eurocentric feminism and an assertion of Chinese postfeminism. While the former re-configures a Chinese female character to accommodate its own cultural politics, the latter allows Hua Mulan to be understood first of all as a woman who is defined by her femininity. Through Disney’s magic touch of cultural homogenization and Americanization, Mulan presents a heroine whose representation of feminist ideals is harnessed by the Disney Studio’s continued efforts to perpetuate its leadership in a consumerist global media economy. The Disney treatment of Mulan’s story further exemplifies a genderized Eurocentric gaze that attempts to thematically de-orientalize the Chinese heroine through an infusion of Western feminism. In other words, Disney’s Mulan executes a character makeover and re-packages the Chinese Mulan as another spokes-princess of its value system. By contrast, the Chinese Hua Mulan demonstrates an increasingly globalized Chinese cinemas’ re-mapping of the world’s popular cultural consumption.

The Two Adaptations and the Role of (Post)Feminism

Disney’s Mulan exploits the ambiguous feminist undertone in the original ballad and translates it to Western feminism. Despite the filmmakers’ avowed efforts to respect the Chinese original story and its cultural authenticity through pre-production field trips to historic spots in China and the integration of Asian and Asian American artists and designers in the production (as discussed by Pam Coats, Tony Bancroft, and Barry Cook in the audio commentary to the 1998 DVD edition of Mulan), Mulan is powerfully reminiscent of a regular American teenage girl: she is smart, high-spirited, outspoken, kind hearted, and harmlessly tomboyish, none of which is deemed appropriate for a Chinese girl in ancient times, nor are these endorsed in the original ballad. Such a characterization makes Mulan instantly relatable to
Disney’s globalized and predominantly Western audience because of its premise as a feminist character.

Moreover, Mulan’s embodiment of Disney’s feminism is far from “a manifesto of women’s liberation” because it is carefully tailored not to be too extreme, lest it “alienate the mainstream.”32 Mulan’s dilemma does not come from her oppression in a patriarchal society, nor does she set out to defy the subordination of women to men. On the contrary, it is precisely a patriarchal society that Mulan desperately wants to fit in through marriage, because this will bring her family honor. It is only because she fails pathetically at the matchmaker’s interview that she suffers a low self-esteem. Thus, the concept of family honor in the film becomes synonymous with an unconditional submission to a patriarchal ideal of a perfect daughter and ultimately a perfect bride, around which the opening sequence is built. Even before the audience sees Mulan, they hear her chant the “Final Admonition,” “Quiet and demure. Graceful. Polite. Delicate. Refined. Poised. Punctual.”33 These values are later both visualized in the dressing-up scene when Mulan undergoes a beauty makeover, and reiterated in the song lyrics of “Honor to Us All,” which outlines the perfect woman that Mulan strives to be: a calm, obedient, hard-working, son-bearing wife. As Mulan joins the chorus of the group of bride-to-be in singing “please bring honor to us all,” her wish to become this submissive, son-bearing bride is crystallized.

Mulan’s wish to uphold the family honor through marriage becomes the film’s structuring device and further undermines her character’s feminist embodiment. As discussed earlier, Mulan’s decision to join the army solves both a personal predicament and a potential familial disaster. Her musical reverie “Reflection” reveals a painful realization that she will fail her father’s expectation for not being bride material. Mulan recognizes her problem quite clearly when she sings, “If I were truly to be myself, / I will break my family’s heart.” Under this circumstance, Mulan’s joining the army unavoidably seems like a desperate alternative to bring honor to her family in an unorthodox manner.

While we must acknowledge a trace of feminist individuality when Mulan is torn between being herself and being a conventional woman, the romanticized ending effectively dissolves Mulan’s potential trespassing and liberating femininity by treating her joining the army as merely a detour on her journey to be a perfect bride. Thus, “the promising marriage at the film’s closure...cancels out this seemingly feminist thematic thread.”34 In other words, Mulan’s final evolution into a perfect bride forms an envelope structure that brings the film’s narrative full circle when she returns home with a potential marriage proposal from a well-qualified bachelor. This happily-ever-after ending resonates with Mulan’s wish to be a perfect daughter at the beginning of the film; it also atones for Mulan’s disobedience to her father and her unruly behavior as a woman warrior. It is safe to argue, therefore, that Mulan’s prospective marriage is comparable to a social bill of oblivion that gives her immunity from being punished as an unconventional woman.

Another necessary condition that allows Disney’s Mulan to emerge as a national heroine without suffering the severe consequences of her intrusion into the patriarchal territory is her submission to the masculine demands of the court in the time of war. This underlying gender discourse mediates each significant achievement of Mulan in the film. Even before Mulan enters the scene at the beginning of the
film, the patriarchal emperor has already essentialized Mulan’s contribution to the country in a metaphor: “A single grain of rice can tip the scale.” Glorious as Mulan’s service may be, she is just as insignificant as a single grain of rice. Although Mulan excels in her battle training, her impressive fighting skills and swordsmanship is contextualized in Captain Li Shang’s highly genderized song “I’ll Make a Man out of You.” It means that when Mulan adopts Ping’s persona, her success as a soldier is primarily masculine. Just as Nadya Labi, wryly points out (1998), “one of Disney’s most vigorous heroines literally has to disguise herself as a boy.” Even at the film’s climatic moment when Mulan wins the final battle against the Huns and saves China as a woman, her feminist significance is severely diluted by the anticipated romance between her and Captain Li Shang, if not her girlish hug of the emperor. At the end of the day, we realize that Mulan’s success only proves that she is as good as a man, but never better. Or, as Richard Corliss succinctly concludes (1998), Mulan is “a girl [that] becomes a man.”

The significance of Mulan’s contribution to save the country is emphasized again in the emperor’s speech to Mulan: despite the long list of her wrongdoings, Mulan’s service to the masculine and patriarchal kingdom is ultimately her saving grace. Thus, the emperor’s bow to Mulan epitomizes the patriarchal value of the masculine kingdom, despite the film’s intention to highlight Mulan’s feminist individuality and capability to “alter the way society thought [about women].” Mulan’s reciprocal hug of the emperor indicates her complete subordination to such patriarchal value system.

Different from Disney’s claim to Western feminism, which emphasizes gender equality between male and female, Jingle Ma’s *Hua Mulan* takes a postfeminist approach to the heroine. Ma’s film prioritizes Hua Mulan’s female gender rather than masculine disguise. Hua Mulan’s cross-dressing does not serve as a negation of her femininity, but rather a re-affirmation and enrichment of her emotional growth and psychological maturity as a woman.

*Hua Mulan*’s conspicuous foregrounding of the heroine’s femininity shows a postfeminist gender discourse in post-socialist Chinese cinema. By postfeminism I refer to a re-instatement of female power by way of celebrating what has been previously labeled as regressive by traditional feminism, although it would be futile to define postfeminism in conclusive terms, given its inherent “interdiscursivity and intercontextuality.” Patricia Mann (1994) offers an insightful observation of postfeminism that sheds light on our present investigation. Highlighting postfeminism’s emphasis on boundary crossing, Mann believes that “postfeminism is a cultural frontier resulting from the breakdown of previous social organizing structures that continue to exist only in various states of disarray.” In a similar vein, postfeminism reflects an “altered stage of gendered conflicts and transformations” that defies binary oppositions and gender essentialism. Accordingly, the postfeminist subject resonates strongly with a re-structuring Chinese society that experiences the breaking down of traditional social, economic, political, gender, and cultural establishments.

*Hua Mulan*’s postfeminist characterization of its titular heroine is crystallized through two remarkable changes in its highly dramatized narrative structure and gender dynamics between Mulan and her love interest Wentai. These two changes also subtly negate Disney’s dubious feminist rendition of Mulan by highlighting
the heroine’s female gender to emphasize a postfeminist discourse. Because Hua Mulan’s female identity is revealed to Wentai very early in the film, her femininity remains constant throughout the film, in the sense that there is always textual reference to her female self. With both Tiger, Hua Mulan’s fellow village friend who serves in the same battalion, and Wentai knowing her secret, Hua Mulan, as well as the audience, is constantly reminded that she is a woman. Because of her gender stability, Hua Mulan ceases to be the woman who is forced to disguise as a man to fight the war, but simply the woman who actively fights the war as herself. She never has to reconcile the conflict between her inner femininity and an exterior masculinity, as Disney’s Mulan does; nor does she have to feign an exterior masculinity to protect a female self, as Mulan in the original ballad does. This empowering gender stability allows Hua Mulan to disrupt “any clear set of critical distinctions between passivity, femininity and women on the one hand and activity, masculinity and men on the other.”

Hua Mulan’s gender stability bespeaks a postfeminist refusal to be understood in binary terms. As a postfeminist action heroine, Hua Mulan “inhibits a non-dualistic space characterized by the interaction of seemingly irreconcilable opposites.” Her integration of masculine exterior and feminine consciousness reshapes the binary distinctions that define this character’s previous cinematic representations. With Wentai and Tiger’s acknowledgment and support for her military and political adventures, Hua Mulan enjoys a boundary-defying freedom that is truly beyond dichotomous gender terms. Her unproblematic female identity, unaffected by her masculine appearance, subtly displaces the burden of signification on the male characters, in the sense that they have to come to terms with her transgressive postfemininity.

_Hua Mulan’s_ another postfeminist reconstruction of the legendary woman is its feminization of Hua Mulan’s emotional growth and maturity in the army. By feminization I refer to a conscientious representation of Hua Mulan’s emotional vulnerability and female sensibility when she is confronted with the cruelty of war (see figure 12.2). This candid portrayal of a Hua Mulan allows her to maintain her

Figure 12.2  Hua Mulan reveals her emotional vulnerability in the battle. A scene from _Hua Mulan_ (2009).
female sensitivity while she makes sense of the war in her own terms, rather than a woman who has to suppress her femininity so that she can blend in with men. Her weakness, fear, and disgust at war all serve to highlight her feminine reaction to the war. To a certain extent, this emphasis on Hua Mulan’s refusal to become like her fellow soldiers, who internalize the logic of war and accept its consequences, crystallizes her determination not to be masculinized.

Conclusion

_Hua Mulan_’s feminizing renovation of her heroine serves as a reaction against other Mulans, wherein she either has to be made into a man, as Li Shang sings in his “I’ll Make a Man out of You” in Disney’s _Mulan_, or has to compete with men on their terms, as Chang Xiangyu’s Mulan sonorously delivers in her solo “Who Says Women Are Inferior to Men?” in the _yaju_ 豫剧 film _Hua Mulan_ in 1956. What enables Hua Mulan to overcome her fear and disgust at the war is not an adoption of masculine callousness after the abandonment of her female disposition; on the contrary, it is her adherence to an inner postfeminism that leads to a victorious war and her triumphant transformation from a feminist woman who tries to prove that she is as good as a man, to a postfeminist heroine who is strong, confident, and beautiful in a different manner from men.

_Hua Mulan_’s political discourse signals its reaction against Disney’s Eurocentric homogenizing adaptation of the Mulan narrative. By using an international production team, _Hua Mulan_ manifests a sustainable geopolitics that is promoted in China’s peaceful rise in foreign policy by using an international and inter-regional cast and well-articulated patriotic messages. As it has become an industrial standard to go international when it comes to casting, _Hua Mulan_’s highly diversified international cast maximizes its star power in an impressively economic manner.

_Hua Mulan_ is unusually candid about its patriotic moral message, which other commercial films have carefully avoided for fear of being labeled as an uninteresting propaganda tool. In various promotional activities and the film’s trailer, Hua Mulan’s patriotic spirit and her loyalty to her country is repeatedly highlighted. Director Jingle Ma never hesitates to articulate his intention to portray a Hua Mulan who prioritizes her duties to the country over that to her father. In an interview with Phoenix TV’s talk show hostess Chen Luyu 陈鲁豫 on November 27, 2009, Ma says, “_Hua Mulan_ is a reflection of my patriotism… [Through this film] I speak my support for China.” This pronounced patriotism is also revealed in Hua Mulan’s decision to stay in the army while she can safely go back home to take care of her sick father. Thus, Hua Mulan’s filial piety is considerably diluted and pushed to the background when she chooses the capitalized family over her individual family. To echo this thematic change, Hua Mulan’s characterization is first defined by the Chinese character “loyalty 忠” before “piety 孝” in the film’s Chinese trailer.

One wonders, is such passionate and unconditional patriotism what director Jingle Ma wants to say in support of his country? The answer might be found in an earlier interview of Ma with Hunan Satellite TV on the film’s promotion tour. On
November 22, 2009, Ma twice iterates his devotion to China through the lines of his heroine Hua Mulan, “I, Hua Mulan, will never betray my own country.” Sincere and touching as it sounds, Ma’s re-confirmation of his political allegiance seems uncalled for, if not pro-actively defensive. Ma’s anxiety becomes more understandable once we put this sentence back into its context in the film. When Hua Mulan suffers a severe defeat in her battle with Mendu (played by Jun Hu) because of the betrayal of the jealous and treacherous commander-in-chief, she says to her troops, “Soldiers may rebel against me; generals may leave me for dead. But I, Hua Mulan, will never betray my country!” Hua Mulan’s anger and disappointment over her betrayal, though deliberately subdued and quickly dismissed by her unswerving faith in her country, is powerfully reminiscent of a widespread discontent among common people in the contemporary Chinese society because of government corruption, inflation, income gaps, and issues in the justice system. Thus, what Jingle Ma tries to imply, ever so cautiously, through Hua Mulan’s devotion to her country, is a similar determination to be loyal to China despite its disappointing deficiencies. Such reassurance, coming from one of the Hong Kong directors, almost guarantees an acknowledging nod from the government. Just as one anonymous article on the online version of the Party newspaper People’s Daily comments, Ma’s new adaptation of the Mulan story represents China’s effort to “enter global cultural competitions with the very best.”

_Hua Mulan_ extends its patriotism to a much broader scope than the implied Han-China in previous cinematic renditions. By constructing a much more sophisticated and round characterization of significant Rouran leaders than the one-dimensional villainous Huns in Disney’s _Mulan_, the Chinese _Hua Mulan_ sustains a more diversified composition of Chinese-ness. The conflict between the ethnic minority Rouran tribes and the Han Chinese Wei is therefore a domestic dispute rather than international war. This film portrays the old Rouran Emperor in a positive manner by emphasizing his sympathy toward the war prisoners from Wei, and he also favors the Rouran princess’s proposal to achieve a peaceful coexistence with Wei through a diplomatic marriage with the Wei prince. Even the scheming and backstabbing new Emperor Mendu expresses his own brand of patriotism when he explains that he intends to “turn the fertile Wei farmlands into our new ranch.” Mendu’s strategy of uniting all tribal forces and defeating Wei is his own way of showing the competent and ambitious leader that he is. Although audiences will not come to love the Rourans, they are strongly encouraged to view them as earnest tribal leaders who truly believe that they are altruistically doing what is best for their people.

While Disney’s _Mulan_ ends with Mulan’s return to a patriarchal society, _Hua Mulan_ goes beyond the heroine’s personal story for a much grander message. The diplomatic marriage between Rouran’s princess and Wei’s prince Wentai is both historically accurate and emblematic of an imperative peaceful solution to domestic, inter-ethnic group conflicts. _Hua Mulan_ has repeatedly asserted its antiwar sentiments through characters from both sides of the war, because peace and solidarity has always been the only correct choice both within and beyond the film. This inter-ethnic group marriage points directly to the official principle in China’s handling of ethnic group issues, “Fifty-six ethnic minorities are a big family 五十六个民族是一家,” which is united by inter-racial marriages. Thus, just as _Hua Mulan_ reclaims
its own Chinese narrative by erasing the Disneyfication of the Mulan story, the Chinese heroine Hua Mulan celebrates what Disney’s Mulan rebels against: public duty over personal happiness.

Notes

1. Disney’s animation Mulan is its first and so far only feature-length animation that has a Chinese heroine in which the studio strategically engages the Asian, Chinese in particular, popular entertainment market in late 1990s. Once released, Mulan attracted great media and critical attention in China with a mixed response toward the rendition of a story that is deeply rooted in Chinese history and culture. However, the box office record did not achieve the same level of success as its predecessor The Lion King by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (1994) because of political fallout between the Chinese government and the Disney Company over the release of Kundun by Martin Scorsese (1997), a film based on the life and writing of the Dalai Lama, an exiled spiritual leader from Tibet. For a more detailed discussion, please see Lan Dong’s Mulan’s Legend and Legacy in China and the United States (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 170–171. Mulan’s commercial misfortune notwithstanding, this film remains arguably one of the most well-known and familiar Disney film in China, which may explain the decision to remake the Mulan film as a live action film so that the story can be “properly” told. The actress who plays Mulan is Vicky Zhao 赵薇, who is an iconic movie star whose name alone attracts huge audience and ample investment.

2. Some examples of contemporary postfeminist films include Zhouyu’s Train 周渔的火车 by Sun Zhou 孙周 (2002), Letter from an Unknown Woman 一个陌生女人的来信 by Xu Jinglei 徐静蕾 (2004), Wu qiong dong 无穷动 by Ning Ying 宁瀛 (2005), Everlasting Regret 长恨歌 by Stanley Kwan 关锦鹏 (2005), Jasmine Flower 杜拉拉升职记 by Hou Yong 侯咏 (2005), and Go! Lala Go! 梅花三度开 by Xu Jinglei 徐静蕾 (2009).


7. The term yuefu 乐府 originally referred to a government bureau that collected folk songs for the court, it later came to be associated with the style of such court-revised folk songs. Ode of Mulan was hailed as one of the two “previous Jades 乐府双璧” among yuefu songs.

10. The story of Mulan plays a central role in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, which traces the trajectory of a Chinese immigrant girl’s life experience growing up in the 1970s America through her encounter with her Chinese cultural heritage. Mulan’s story is adapted in great liberty and becomes intricately intertwined with the narrator’s own struggles in a male-dominated society in the 1970s, when the feminist movement becomes an empowering inspiration. One significant reconfiguration is that Mulan in The Woman Warrior is portrayed as a female avenger, who was trained by mythical figures and comes back to the village to avenge the wrongdoings on her fellow kinsmen. She kills the village landowner and leads an army of women who eventually execute the emperor of China. This is drastically different from the original Mulan narrative, where Mulan defends her country and the emperor as a good citizen and patriot. Read within the context of the narrator’s frustrating Chinese American life as an aspiring young woman, Mulan becomes a symbol of female agency as well as a disruptive power as her story is reconstructed. By using the narrative reconstruction, Kingston’s narrator creates a unique frame of reference as she attempts to form her gender, cultural, and social identities. Mulan’s fearless woman warrior persona therefore becomes one of the most important connections that the narrator shares with her mythical heroine. See Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (New York: Knopf, 1975).

17. “Hua” is the pinyin for Mulan’s family name 花 in Chinese. Disney’s animation only uses Mulan’s first name in the film.
19. Fa is the Romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation of “Hua,” Mulan’s family name. For a more detailed discussion on Disney’s politicizing the Mulan narrative by omitting her last name, see Sheng-mei Ma, “Mulan Disney, It’s Like, Re-orients: Consuming China and Animating Teen Dreams,” in The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom, ed. Brenda Ayres (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 149-164.
22. Mei Chi 池玫, “Traveling across Context and Cultural Negotiation: From Mulan to Kong Fu Panda 跨语境旅行与文化协商—从《花木兰》到《功夫熊猫》,” Journal of


26. To my knowledge, eight films adapted the Hua Mulan story, including Peking Opera film *Mulan congjun* (木兰从军 Mulan Joins the Army) starring Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, produced by Minxinshi Films (民新制造影片公司) in 1926, and the same company’s film by the same name with a different actress in 1928, Tianyi Qingnian Films’ 天一青年影片公司 Hua Mulan congjun (花木兰从军 Hua Mulan Joins the Army) in 1927, Huacheng Films’ 华成影业公司 *Mulan congjun* (The Woman General) in 1939, the 1951 Cantonese Opera 粤剧 *Hua Mulan* (花木兰 Lady General Fa Muk-lan) by Chen Pi 陈皮 and Gu Wenzhong 顾文宗, the 1956 Yu Opera 豫剧 film *Hua Mulan* 花木兰 by Guoquan Liu and Xinshi Zhang starring Chang Xiangyu 常香玉, the 1961 Cantonese Opera *Hua Mulan* (花木兰 Feminine General "Far Muk Lan") by Baida 百达 and Runcheng Entertainment Co. Ltd. 润程娱乐发行有限公司, and Shaw Brothers’ 邵氏兄弟有限公司 1964 Huamgmei Opera 黄梅戏 *Hua Mulan* (花木兰).


28. Liu, “China vs. Disney.”

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Rouran 柔然 is a nomad tribe in Northern China between late fourth to mid-sixth century AD.


33. The “Final Admonition 四德” refers to the second half of a set of rules for good female behavior in ancient China. The Admonitions 三从四德 comes from the *Admonition Scrolls* by Ban Zhao 班昭 in Han Dynasty (212 BC–220 AD).


41. The inscription of a Chinese postfeminism in popular culture seeks a poster child that appeals to a changing audience. As China undergoes rapid economic development and globalization, Chinese women are increasingly conscious of the inadequacy of Western feminism. While the overemphasis on female sexuality offends a Chinese sensibility...
that is still Confucian at heart, the undifferentiated demand for gender equality denies women of their gender identity. Thus, this need to reestablish a characteristically Chinese feminist awareness and its visual representation requires a full acknowledgment and embrace of womanhood. The cinematic portrayal of a New Woman epitomizes such postfeminist ideals. This New Woman is represented as morally principled, emotionally mature, and sexually conscious, who seldom verbalizes radical feminist stance.


44. See Liu, “China vs. Disney.”

45. Using actors who come from almost all the different Chinese language areas/regions, including overseas Chinese population, *Hua Mulan* leaves no stone unturned when it comes to audience appeal. Donning heavy armors for the titular hero is Zhao Wei (Vicky Zhao), who achieves her pan–East Asian fame as the wide-eyed princess Huanzhu in a hit TV drama *Princess Pearl* (1998–2003) and boasts a huge fan base. Zhao Wei and her co-star Chen Kun 陈坤 have proved both their bankability and acting expertise as both are frequent winners of awards in China and East Asia. A native of Canada, Jaycee Chan 陈祖名 is a rising star in Hong Kong cinema with strong support from Jackie Chan 成龙, who also happens to be his father. Playing the villainous Mendu (门独) of Rouran, Hu Jun 胡军 is a topnotch star who attracts not only mainland and overseas Chinese, but also Western art house frequents. The Taiwan-based Korean American singer Li Jiuzhe 李玖哲, although only playing a relatively minor role, appeals to a much younger and more chic urban demographic. One particular cast member who attracts much media attention is the Russian tenor Vitas 维塔斯, illustrating how the Chinese film taps into the resources of previously uncharted Russian popular culture.

46. Director Ma’s original words are, “花木兰是我们爱国情怀的体现, (通过这部电影)我要为国家讲一些话.”

47. The original Chinese goes: “我花木兰绝不背叛国家.”

48. The original Chinese is: “士兵可以弃我, 将军可以叛我, 我花木兰绝不背叛国家!”


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