



RISING ASIA  
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA  
FOUNDATION

FILM STUDIES  
RESEARCH ESSAY

JING CHEN

*Wake Forest University, North Carolina*

## *Mulan*

# **The Fearless, Patriotic, Warrior-Heroine as Women's Liberator in Chinese Popular Culture, 1939-2020**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article argues that the cinematic representation of the legendary Chinese folklore heroine, Hua Mulan, over some eighty years, has become a convenient confluence of a wide array of gender issues under various political ideologies in contemporary China. Through a close visual analysis, this essay explores how the figure of Mulan in the 1939 film, *Maiden in Armour*, was intentionally reshaped and influenced by the cultural development and political changes occurring during that period. For thousands of years, the legend of Mulan disguising herself as a man to occupy and maintain her aged father's place in the army has educated and moved so many Chinese that the visual representat-

**RISING ASIA JOURNAL.**

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2 (SUMMER) MAY TO AUGUST 2022.

© RISING ASIA FOUNDATION 2022.

ation of Mulan has subsequently occupied a significant place in Chinese popular culture. Representations of Mulan in films such as *Maiden in Armour*, the 1964 film *Hua Mulan*, and the 2020 Hollywood blockbuster *Mulan*, have been reshaped under three historical environments, namely the Republican era (1912–1949), the Socialist era (1949–1978), and the period of “Reform and Opening” (1978–present). Scholars, however, have not as yet pursued detailed research into the historical environment that Mulan-themed films were contextualized in: how the story of Mulan has undergone appropriation, modification, and regulation in Chinese patriarchal society from the perspective of cinema studies. Through an interdisciplinary interrogation into this multi-layered historical figure, this article sheds light on the struggle for gender equality and the ideological connotations formulated by popular culture.

**Keywords:** Hua Mulan, Chinese Popular Culture, Chinese Cinema Studies, Ouyang Yuqian, Yue Feng, Nikola Jean “Niki” Caro

Alas oh alas! Alas oh alas!

Mulan is weaving cloth of topmost class.

“Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,

Mulan weaves, facing the door.”

- From “The Ballad of Mulan,” composed in the fifth or sixth century C.E.<sup>1</sup>

**T**he epic adventure of the seemingly ordinary girl named Hua Mulan, whose life was documented in a ballad composed more than 1,500 years ago, starts at a loom where she is weaving, and contemplating her future life, normal for most girls like her, to marry a man from a village nearby. Afterwards, she would shoulder the responsibility of managing the inner household space, weaving and

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu Tian, Chen Xinxin, Wu Huiya, *The Ballad of Mulan* (Beijing: Comic Book Publisher, 2020); and “The Ballad of Mulan,” Primary Source Document, Asia for Educators, Columbia University, <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/mulan.pdf>.



raising kids, while her husband would control the outer space, bringing in money and putting food on the table. The labor division was believed to be an ideal social order of traditional Chinese patrilineal society.<sup>2</sup> Mulan, however, boldly broke the regulation. Taking the place of her elderly father in war and serving her country valiantly in disguise as a man, Mulan's rebelling against orthodoxy is, interestingly, accepted by the Chinese-speaking world that respects her as a popular folk warrior-heroine. The visual representation of Mulan has subsequently occupied a significant place in Chinese popular culture, undergoing a series of rewrites, reformulation, and certainly reimagination. Besides the consistent celebratory depiction of her wisdom and courage, scholars have been left debating her cinematic portrayals by film makers and scriptwriters who have altered Mulan's adventure into a credible story under Chinese patrilineal society. To begin with, the representations of Hua Mulan in the film *Maiden in Armour* (1939) were reshaped within the contours of the complex historical environment during the Republican era (1912-1949).

The character of this extraordinary young woman lives through the "Ballad of Mulan," written in the fifth or sixth century C.E. when China was divided between north and south.<sup>3</sup> In it, Mulan refers to the Son of Heaven as "Khan"—the title given to rulers by the pastoral nomadic people of the north. An excerpt from the poem shows some elements of lyricism and a sense of meter, but its simple style denotes that it was aimed more at peasants and ordinary people rather than the elite.

---

<sup>2</sup> Zhuoyi Wang, "Cultural 'Authenticity' as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis," *Arts* 9, no. 3 (July 2020): 78.

<sup>3</sup> "The Ballad of Mulan," Primary Source Document, Asia for Educators, Columbia University.

Despite Mulan's high moral standing within Chinese culture, and in various filmic and literary reformulations, scholars have not yet pursued detailed research into the historical environment Mulan-themed films were contextualized in: how the story of Mulan has been modified and regulated in Chinese patriarchal society from the perspective of cinema studies. That said, through a close visual analysis, this essay will first dwell on how the visual representation of Hua Mulan in *Maiden in Armour* was reshaped and influenced by the cultural development and political changes in contemporary Chinese society, arguing that such a visual representation has become a convenient confluence of a wide array of gender issues under certain political ideologies. By offering an interdisciplinary interrogation into this multi-layered historical figure, my analysis illuminates the struggle for gender equality and the ideological connotations formulated by popular culture.



Left: a 1939 poster of the film, *Maiden in Armour*; and right: Mulan in battle armor. Both photos are in the public domain.

## Shadows Lurk Below an Admittedly Successful Patriotic Film

Different from the traditional figure depicted in “The Ballad of Mulan” where Mulan’s motivation to join the army is mainly triggered by filial piety, Mulan in *Maiden in Armour* is described as a patriotic independent woman, inconsistent with women’s role in contemporary society of Shanghai from 1937 to 1941, during the so-called “isolated-island period.” The early spring of 1939 in Shanghai brought in a climate of unpleasantness as Japanese invaders occupied most parts of the city, unscrupulously setting up “comfort stations,”—military brothels where local women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Army.<sup>4</sup> The literary world was extraordinarily flourishing thanks to the resuscitation of the economy in the relatively peaceful French concessions and half of the public concessions to the south of the Suzhou River.<sup>5</sup> The runaway commercial success of the patriotic film, *Maiden in Armour*, was inevitable as it was promoted by intellectuals who were attempting to attain national liberation. After remaining on the screen for a record-breaking eighty-three days, *Maiden in Armour* enjoyed unprecedented box office returns of over 100,000 yuan.<sup>6</sup>

As many as fourteen famous film critics pointed out that “it injects huge power into China at the current stage and shows us how to struggle and how to gain victory.”<sup>7</sup> Mulan did accomplish the mission

---

<sup>4</sup> “Selected Archives on the ‘Comfort Women’—Sex slaves of Japanese Army,” Shanghai Municipal Archives, August 17, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Qiu Wang, “Shanghai in the ‘isolated-island period,’” *Sohu News*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Mengjiao Wang, “A Story of Mulan Films,” Postgraduate Program, Film and Theatre, Southwest University, May 20, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Hua Qi, Han Wu and 14 film reviewers, “Recommendation of *Maiden in Armour*,” *Herald* (Shanghai), February 17, 1939.

to raise the spirits of the masses as she defended her motherland successfully against invasion and returned home after gaining fame. The film celebrates the rise of the new modern woman who goes against traditional norms of behavior—against the background of the hidden dangers dividing contemporary Chinese society, as ideological rivalry pitted the Chinese Communist Party against the Nationalist Party.

### **A Mirror of Turbulent Cooperation**

In the film, between Mulan's last meal with her family and her riding away from the home town, the camera pans to several other villagers who have enlisted: a husband bidding farewell to his newly married wife; a father leaving his new born child, and pretending to be happy, and an old mother exhorting her twins to be careful. They were all common people whose normal lives were suddenly dislocated by their being forced to leave their loved ones, unsure whether they would meet again. In the film, it appears that they share the same distress and feelings with Mulan. In the next scene, however, when the father and husband mentioned above see Mulan riding beside them, they provoke Mulan deliberately and laugh at her feminine looks. Furthermore, they keep making fun of her, using humiliating words until Mulan speaks calmly, yet sternly, "You two, the country is now under grave danger. We have all joined the army to fight for our country. There is no reason that compatriots should bully compatriots!"

Mulan's warning does not have the desired effect and the conflict escalates, to be dealt with by force. Even though Mulan defeats those who taunt her without turning it into a bloody incident, their insults and incitements continue through the entire war, without any compromise or understanding. The relentless conflict in the film



extends into reality: the conflict between Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party remained unresolved through the entire period of the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), and their cooperation was always turbulent. After the war ended, the two parties shredded their uneasy peace and became deadly enemies. The hidden danger implied in *Maiden in Armour* turned out to be prophetic.

There are other scenes in *Maiden in Armour* where compatriots bully compatriots: officials demand bribes when recruiting Mulan's father, and military counselors work with the enemy to earn money. As China was under Nationalist rule when the film was produced, the film implies the prevalence of corruption in the Nationalist government. Such plots in the film were designed for a reason. Following the Battle of Nanjing in December 1937, the original relatively peaceful relationship between the Nationalist Party and Chinese Communist Party worsened. On February 28, 1938, the Shanxi Department of the Nationalist Party asked to dismiss the Communist New Fourth Army.<sup>8</sup> Later, many important Communist members including Xuan Xiafu, a senior advisor to the Eighth Route Army (a formation led by the Chinese Communist Party during the War of Resistance Against Japan) were arrested and murdered secretly by Chiang Kai-shek's special agents.<sup>9</sup> The scriptwriter of *Maiden in Armour*, Ouyang Yuqian, criticized the Nationalist Party's atrocities against the Communist Party at a time of national calamity.<sup>10</sup> Ouyang Yuqian was the chairman of the

---

<sup>8</sup> The New Fourth Army was built as a result of the second Nationalist-Communist cooperation on October 12, 1937, recorded in "The Activities of the Shanxi Provincial Party Committee in Xianyang during the Anti-Japanese War," *The History of the Xianyang Communist Party*, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> "Inspired by the hero—Xuan Xiafu," Xinhua News, November 8, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Liang Wan, "The Founding History of Shanghai Theatre Jiuwang Association," Shanghai Theatre, Vol. 3, 1997.

Shanghai Theatre Jiuwang Association, led by the Communist Party which aimed to support the Anti-Japanese War through the power of the theater. The cooperation between Ouyang Yuqian and the famous left-wing patriotic director Bu Wancang on *Maiden in Armour* was definitely a powerful weapon that blunted the Nationalist Party's bullying.

### **An Escape from the Female Space**

Sweeping changes occurring in Chinese society starting from the 1910s saw the construction of a brand-new standard for women amid great fanfare. Many intellectuals advocated women's new position in family and society, arguing that traditional women, confined in the domestic space, were unable to nurture and educate their children to be future citizens of a civilized China. They, therefore, urged a reconstruction of traditional women into "modern" Chinese women on the western pattern. "Modern" women were asked to be confident, strong, and full of energy.<sup>11</sup> Mulan, thus, became an exemplary model to educate women. The actress playing Mulan—Chen Yunshang—was particularly well known for her vigorousness and vivaciousness, as was Mulan in the film which offered women a precious opportunity to step into a man's domain and win their independence and individuality. The actual status of women at the time was far removed from the blueprint, with Mulan in *Maiden in Armour* serving as an excellent example. *Maiden in Armour* begins in an open outdoor space where birds fly and rabbits run free. In such a background, Mulan appears in androgynous attire to practice hunting skills. After accidentally shooting a villager, the atmosphere of freedom is suddenly in peril. Six men come out of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Mengjiao Wang, "A Story of Mulan Films," Postgraduate Program, Film and Theatre, Southwest University, May 20, 2017.



grass with the intention of grabbing Mulan's prey. The words they hurl at Mulan are insulting. Mulan realizes that she has shot a man, mistaking him for an animal. The man she has shot calls her "guiyatou" whose literal translation in English is "annoying maid." His companions call her "xiao niangmener" and "xiao guaiguai," which are often used to denounce wives in an indecent way. After Mulan apologizes politely, they still molest her, asking her to stay as their wife and have fun with them. All of these words carry contempt towards women. They blame her for lacking in shame as hunting outdoors is obviously not "suitable" for a woman. After Mulan gets rid of them and comes home safely, her parents also scold her for her unladylike dressing and behavior regardless of her brilliant hunting skills, complaining that she was not doing domestic womanly work of taking care of the family and weaving. Mulan's outstanding performance on the battlefield only receives contempt from other people. Her experiences depicted in the film are a vivid reflection of the paradox facing the women of the time: The traditional norms imposed gender-based responsibility on them which made it impossible for them to gain respect and acceptance in a man's domain, even if she performed better than them.

In order for Mulan to cross the threshold from the domestic space to the public space in a phallogocentric "man's world," she must reexamine her performative feminine qualities. As the title of the film has it, *Maiden in Armour* is itself a symbol of androgynous clothing. Judith Butler has famously indicated in such a situation women have to dress or act like a man since engaging in battlefield combat is always deemed inappropriate for them. The film not only underscores the failure of the new standard to bestow respect and independence to women, but also reveals a potential risk for women arising from

scopophilia, or what Laura Mulvey refers to as the “being-looked-at-ness,” where women are viewed as an object of sexual pleasure. In the film, a scene with not-so-subtle sexual connotations has Mulan surrounded by six villagers. One of the men shows off his shooting skills by teasing Mulan and using his arrow to touch her eyes, mouth, legs, abdomen, and finally her back. Then comes a close-up shot of Mulan's embarrassed look and the men's indecent laughter. In another scene, Mulan disguises herself as a married woman from a foreign country to obtain information about the enemy, but she is found out by enemy soldiers. Since women should not be allowed to appear in the battlefield space belonging to men, the soldiers flirt with her even though she claims that she is married. One soldier wants to send her to their leader, saying, “Finally we find a woman. It is impossible for us to let you go.” In masculine eyes, the woman was looked at as an object of sexual pleasure, and inferior to men. At the end of the film, Mulan returns home after refusing to accept an appointment as Shang Shulang, a government advisor to the emperor that is selected for their talent, and possesses the qualities of Xiao 孝 meaning filial, and Liang 廉 meaning not corrupt. The position of Shang Shulang belongs to an ancient government system under which Xiaolian denotes a category of persons that were recommended to become government officials who stay around the emperor to help him deal with matters of state. With a change of her clothes from military uniform to ladylike garb, Mulan comes back to the woman's space. The homecoming means the end of her escape from the female space, underscoring the fates of thousands of women of the time. After a transient performance in the male domain, returning to the family is their final choice.

Interestingly, Mulan's fate resembles the life of the actress, Chen Yunshang, who plays the role of Mulan in *Maiden in Armour*. In



childhood she was given the boyish name “minqiang,” whose literal English translation is strengthening the masses, and carrying great expectation from her father, she later adopted the girl-like name of Yunshang when she started her career in the films. Yunshang, literally meaning clothes as beautiful as a cloud, derives from Libai’s poem describing the beauty of Yang Guifei (the wife of Emperor Tang Xuanzong, one of the four beauties in Chinese literature who was finally killed because the soldiers blamed her for causing trouble in the court). In a case of life imitating art, Yunshang reached the peak of her career at the age of twenty-four, and chose to return home and quit acting to take care of her husband and children.<sup>12</sup>

### **Exploring the Historical Vortex: *Hua Mulan* (1964)**

The film *Hua Mulan* (1964) reflects the controversial situation not only of its director, Yue Feng, but also many other filmmakers from the 1930s to the 1970s when the China won the Sino-Japanese War and the CCP finally emerged to lead the country. The CCP encouraged the production of left-wing films in the 1930s, aiming to turn films into a media tool for the purpose of propagating messages of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. During this period, there was a heated debate regarding “soft films” and “hard films” among the filmmakers. The “soft film” makers believed that films were more a tool for entertainment while the “hard film” directors had an ambition to educate the masses and save the country through the medium of cinema, which categorized them as the makers of left-wing films.<sup>13</sup> Bu

---

<sup>12</sup> “Chen Yunshang—The Queen of the Film Passes Away and Her Success of Family and Career both were in Shanghai,” *Daily News*, July 2, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Xian Jia, “Studies on Director Yue Feng’s Early Films (before 1949),” Postgraduate Program, Film Study, China Film Art Research Center, May 22, 2013.

Wancang, the director of *Maiden in Armour*, belonged to the left-wing group and cultivated progressive ideas in his films. Meanwhile, there was another cinematic prodigy, Yue Feng, who had gained fame in left-wing filmmaking early at the age of twenty-three. As the director of the films *Raging Waves of China Sea* (1933) and *Escape* (1935), which were crucial to the left-wing movement, Yue Feng also became a model for left-wing filmmakers. However, the Nationalist Party in power kept suppressing the production of left-wing films, causing losses to their production companies. In these circumstances, the Yihua Company which employed Yue Feng decided to revise its policy by making box office revenue the main consideration. As a result, many "soft films" were produced during 1935-1937. Yue Feng had thus been forced to turn into a "soft film" director whose films were later criticized by left-wing intellectuals as "the opium and the red pills for people."<sup>14</sup> With little power to fight the Nationalist Party and the Yihua Company, Yue Feng only dared to show his personal support for "hard films": "The boss only cared about the benefit . . . progressive films are hardly accepted by the audience and the film censorship is really hard."<sup>15</sup> During Japan's invasion of Shanghai in 1937, Yue Feng chose to stay in Shanghai to keep producing films for the Huaying Company whose films could hardly avoid being affected by the Japanese invaders who were eager to create the "East Asian Co-prosperity Zone" through the imagination and ideology.<sup>16</sup> Although Yue Feng did make films to serve

---

<sup>14</sup> Chen Bo, Yi Ming, "Xi Linmen," Film Review in China During the 1930s, *China Film Press*, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Yi Ming, "Director Yue Feng (I)," *North Film Pictorial Magazine*, no. 2 (1987): 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Tengfei, "A Controversial Heritage: The Shanghai Film History (1941-1945)," Doctoral program in Film Studies, Shanghai University, April 2016.



Japanese policies, he preferred to shoot commercial films without political ideology. Later, he was blamed for working for the Japanese and was labeled the “Funiyingren” (“the betrayed filmmaker”) for the unclear political attitude in his films. When the film production center moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1949, Yue Feng moved to Hong Kong to start a new stage of his filmmaking career. Yue Feng made four films for the Changcheng Film Production Company which were typical left-wing films. In the film *Home, Sweet Home* (1950), Yue Feng presents the darkness, hopelessness, and despair in Hong Kong and expressed his wish to come back to the mainland.

During the 1960s, Yue Feng served in the Shaoshi Film Company which was thought to be right-wing but did not actually have a clear ideological preference. It was during this period that Yue Feng developed his own style of not being too “left” or too “right.” Based on Chinese traditional values and structures, Yue Feng developed what was called “cultural nationalism.” Yue Feng and the Shaoshi Film Company created a series of films with the Huangmei Opera as a way to create a traditional China which was imaginary and abstract from the reality. Some scholars believe that it was his way of claiming his “orthodox” roots in the Chinese-speaking world to fight against the power of the left-wing which existed in post-war Hong Kong.<sup>17</sup> The text and plot of the 1964 film *Hua Mulan*, however, demonstrated his wish of unifying China and stopping the conflicts between different ideological and political groups.

---

<sup>17</sup> Su Tao, “Moving ahead in Historical Vortex: Yue Feng and Hong Kong Film after WWII: Yue Feng and the Post-war Hong Kong Films,” *Contemporary Films*, Vol. 7 (2018).

## A Utopian China based on Equality, Regardless of Ideology

At the beginning of *Maiden in Armour*, a conflict arises over the question whether Mulan should replace her father to join the army. In order to persuade her father, Mulan dresses up as a man who wants to compete with her father. Before going to fight in the war, she twice poses the same question to her father: "Regardless of being a man or woman, everyone should protect the country, is it right?" Her father's answer is "Yes." When her mother opposes his decision, Mulan's father says, "As long as one can kill the enemy, who cares if he is a man or a woman; as long as one can defend his country, who cares if he disguises himself or not." The idea of equal treatment for everyone who is patriotic is first introduced here. Under the protection of their neighbor's son, Hua Ming, Mulan finally departs from home. In the village inn where many soldiers are gathered, Mulan and Hua Ming encounter some "Yinggunzi" (rascals in the army). When Hua Ming asks them why people want to join the army, they give several reasons, such as "finding a wife," "to become the leader and make money," and "to earn a living by being a soldier." These answers dissatisfy Hua Ming who asks Mulan to step out of the inn. While Hua Ming complains about these rascals, none of whom have joined the army for the purpose of killing the invaders and protecting the country, Mulan has a different idea: "It is unavoidable to come into contact with different kinds of people. Listening them talk about their experience and knowing some of the rules of being a soldier is not a completely bad thing." Mulan's tolerance of people who have different thoughts and ideas is a reflection of Yue Feng's point of view—that it is unwise for people who share the same culture and history to remain divided and to fight each other based on differing ideologies. Instead, people should



unify for the common good of the country, regardless of their differences. In the film, General Li offers the same advice. In order to persuade Mulan to drink wine with the soldiers, General Li makes an inspiring speech: “We are here to kill the strong enemy and protect our country. You have the same wish. We have the same wish. We should join efforts with each other. We will never return until all the enemies are eliminated.” Although Mulan hardly drinks wine and has refused to drink several times before, she is repeatedly encouraged and gets drunk because she is delighted to hear that General Li has the same opinion as her. The filmic dialogue and Yue Feng’s personal views converge as he emphasizes the idea of the unification of different groups three times in the film. Through the eyes of Mulan, the audience views a utopian China where people fight together against the external world. It was Yue Feng’s last dream that could only exist in the film, an unfinished dream of a filmmaker who was weary of being labeled “left” or “right” for thirty years and endured a controversial reputation.

## **Gender “Equality” Built on Unequal Gender Perspectives**

Despite Mulan’s dedication as a patriotic warrior, she was relegated to an inferior social position at the time. In the film *Hua Mulan*, Yue Feng gives Mulan the opportunity to express the idea of gender equality and to argue against the prevalent bias against women. Despite the progress made in those years towards the development of women’s status, the new woman’s social status was still built on the “function” of the woman when compared to the man and the concept of “being a good woman” under the dictates of traditional patrilineal society. Possibly the most important standard of being a woman is to keep her chastity, the so-called “zhen jie” in Chinese even though it is patently

discriminatory. When Mulan has a conversation with the soldiers at night, one soldier complains, "As the old saying goes, woman is disaster. They are always skittish and lubricious." Mulan argues despite Hua Ming's effort to dissuade her. She states, "You are totally wrong to say that woman is disaster. Although there are skittish and lubricious women, there are lots of women who are 'san zhen jiu lie.'" San zhen jiu lie was a widely used Chinese idiom to praise the chastity of women in the feudal period when they were "faithful to the death to her husband's memory."<sup>18</sup> If a woman committed suicide after her husband's death, she would become the "lie nv" (the chaste woman) for whom a Monument of Virtue (zhen jie pai fang) would be built that would also honor her husband's family. In order to get this honor, countless young widows were forced to die in very cruel ways like hanging herself to death or drowning in the river. In the Ming Dynasty, over 36,000 women committed suicide in order to become "lie nv."<sup>19</sup> In the film, Mulan agrees with such unequal restraints on the sexual rights of women and praises the ones who keep their chastity. The culture of chastity was an unavoidable part of Chinese culture and still influences Chinese society today. Some scholars believe that both men and women should remain chaste, but women's chastity should be preserved, especially when the woman is unmarried.<sup>20</sup> Despite Yue Feng's seemingly progressive political ideas, his attitudes towards women and gender were still greatly colored by his views on chastity, which is shown in Mulan's agreement with the unequal requirement

---

<sup>18</sup> Han Dictionary, the online electronic dictionary, Yue ICP Bei number 10071303.

<sup>19</sup> Everyday Bookstore, "The Monument of Virtue in Ancient China: Constraint of Woman or Faith to Chastity?" *Sohu News*, April 4, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Li Qiaoli, "Reflection on Views on Chastity in Current Society," Postgraduate Program, Philosophy, Fujian Normal University, June 2006.



for women to remain chaste. In another Yue Feng film, *The Deformed* (1960), his view of gender equality is more clearly revealed. The heroine Shu Xian is a beautiful woman who, because of her poverty, has to marry Yu Sheng, an extremely ugly man. When she falls love with Yu Sheng's handsome cousin Guo Xiong, Yu Sheng chooses to depart. However, Guo Xiong feels guilty and abandons Shu Xian. Finally, Shu Xian asks Yu Sheng to come back and they live a happy life. In this story, when Yu Sheng decides to quit, he tells Guo Xiong that Shu Xian must still keep her chastity after marriage. As a woman, Shu Xian has never had the ability to choose love and her fate is completely controlled by the men in the film. She is more like an object transferred between the two men who use chastity as a standard to measure her. This storyline reflects the filmmaker Yue Feng's concurrence with the traditional restraints towards women. Even though Mulan seems to argue for women's rights against the soldiers who represents the patriarchy, she still did not jump out of the traditional chains that shackled women.

Yue Feng does concede the effort made by women to struggle for equality, but he hardly presents any other possibilities for women besides supporting their husbands. Later in the film, a soldier points out that even though women are not all skittish and lubricious, they are still very lazy, adding that "the man works hard and fights for the country but woman stays at home and lives a happy life." To refute this point, Mulan lists several duties that woman can perform when the man is out at war, "The husband is out for the war and the woman replaces his work. They plough for the grain for the army, and they weave clothes for the army. The military supplies mostly depend on women. You need to be careful when speaking as all your mothers are women." Mulan's argument seems powerful but is still trapped in

traditional Chinese patrilineal society where women are respected only when they become the mother of a man.

It is hard to give a clear definition of Yue Feng's political preference. He was a young director who used "hard films" as strong political propaganda to fight for the country when it faced an existential crisis in the 1930s. But he is much more—the "betrayed filmmaker" who chose to stay in Shanghai under the control of the Japanese Army in the 1940s; he is famous as a "left-wing filmmaker" in post-war Hong Kong in the 1950s; and he was also labeled a "right-wing filmmaker" just ten years later who fought against the left-wing in Hong Kong through his films with the Huangmei Opera. He died in 1999 before the arrival of the twenty-first century, leaving the Chinese-speaking world with endless discussion. Through the film *Hua Mulan*, it is possible for us to see a small fragment of Yue Feng's deep thoughts in that turbulent era, which were a reflection of the struggles faced by many filmmakers who moved in the historical vortex.

### **Politically Correct and Culturally Opposite: *Mulan* (2020)**

Four decades of reform and openness starting in 1978 generated rapid economic development which changed people's lives across the Chinese spectrum including their appetite for art and entertainment. The Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, proposed the ideal of "cultural self-confidence" in 2014. In 2016, he officially announced the new "Four Matters of Confidence" (confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture) that went with "Cultural self-confidence." "Cultural self-confidence" became an increasingly important topic of discussion among policymakers on how to create films presenting the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics.



The growing profile of “cultural self-confidence” was evident in the large size of the Chinese film market that has attracted western film studios, a development that generated new concerns. The need to cater for what is politically correct should never be the only requirement of the western films that aim to benefit from the enormous Chinese market. Rather, western films should portray Chinese culture from the Chinese perspective instead of the common bias and stereotyping by the western world, which is a matter of serious concern in the current crop of western films. Despite the effort made by Disney and its cohorts, *Mulan* is obviously a typical example of a western film which fails to achieve its proper goal in the Chinese film market.

It is unfair to say that *Mulan* did not take the Chinese audience seriously enough. In order to better portray a Chinese story, Disney employed a group of Chinese scholars and historians and shot the scenes at over twenty locations in China.<sup>21</sup> All the actors were Chinese and the main actress, Liu Yifei, who played Hua Mulan, is a well-known patriotic actress. Despite her American identity, she showed her support for China and clarified her identity as a Chinese person in many public fora. After moving to Hollywood in 2008, she was once asked whether she would abandon the Chinese film industry. Liu’s answer was very clear, “I prefer to make films inside my motherland as it is more intimate to me. Because I am a Chinese.”<sup>22</sup> In 2019, after the Hong Kong riots Liu Yifei tweeted on the blog of *People’s Daily* on Weibo (the main social media in China, like Twitter): “I support Hong Kong

---

<sup>21</sup> Amy Qin, Amy Chang Chien, “Imagined as a Blockbuster in China, ‘Mulan’ Fizzles,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Hao Yan, “Liu Yifei Doesn’t Deliberately Shoot Foreign Films because She Feels More Intimate in the Motherland,” *Dalian Evening Newspaper*, April 10, 2008.

policemen, too.” This led to the boycott of *Mulan* in Hong Kong. Interestingly, while many Chinese people showed sympathy for Liu Yifei and other actors in the film, they also supported the boycott of *Mulan* as it was a Disney film.<sup>23</sup> It was not surprising that many Chinese people showed their dislike of Disney and its movie. Early in 1997 China had banned the cartoon version of *Mulan* for eight months because Disney touched another sensitive issue—Xi Zang (Tibet). Disney ignored the boycott in China and in 1997 produced the Martin Scorsese film, *Kundun*, which depicts the life and writings of the exiled Tibetan political and spiritual leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, in a sympathetic way.<sup>24</sup> Twenty years later, *Mulan* faced the same problem at another place—Xinjiang. At the end of the subtitles, the producers thank eight governmental institutions in Xinjiang which led to a new boycott overseas. Although Xinjiang was claimed officially as a part of China by Emperor Qian Long since 1768, and Xinjiang has been under the management of China for over two hundred years, many in the west still argue that Xinjiang should be independent from China. One of the key instruments used by the west to attack China is the state of human rights in Xinjiang.<sup>25</sup> This controversy provided a good opportunity for Disney to clarify its attitude on certain issues in China, however Disney hesitated again. The CEO of Disney, Christine M. McCarthy, admitted that the subtitle did point the issue towards

---

<sup>23</sup> Guo Xiao, “Because of Supporting the Hong Kong Policemen, Liu Yifei’s *Mulan* is Boycotted by the Extremists on the Internet Overseas,” *Guancha Syndicate*, August 17, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Amy Qin, Audrey Carlson, “How Does China Rewrite Its Script,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> William T. Rowe, *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009).



them.<sup>26</sup> Disney's ambiguous attitude is not the only reason leading to the commercial failure of *Mulan*. The overall presentation of *Mulan*'s story also reflects a certain bias against Chinese culture.

## A Western Princess in China

One of the most popular heroines in the Chinese narrative, Hua Mulan has undergone over forty adaptations into film, drama, traditional opera, song, and even video game. She is more like a symbol of what a heroine should be in Chinese traditional society. She can be brave and filial, but she will never be able to chase her own dream as a woman under the patrilineal society. In contemporary China, women face such a new dilemma which is based on traditions. Under the slogan "Women hold up half the sky," coined by Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China, women's rights and responsibilities are redefined. As the Chinese feminist, Dai Jinhua, points out such a slogan is relevant "to some degree, when the women nowadays are permitted to share the power of society and speech, they lose their sexual identity for themselves and speech at the same time."<sup>27</sup> Dai Jinhua explains that while the original story of *Mulan* is "organized as to agree with the system of monarchy," the new adaptation of *Mulan*'s story should be carefully arranged considering its historical and political background. Embedding new virtues or personality traits within *Mulan* will be a dangerous adaptation, especially because these virtues violate the norms of Chinese patrilineal society. Despite the good reviews by western media and critics, which mainly focused on the "romantic

---

<sup>26</sup> Brooks Barnes, Amy Qin, "Disney Wanted to Make a Splash in China With 'Mulan.' It Stumbled Instead," *New York Times*, September 15, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Dai Jinhua, "How to Understand the Female Dilemma Like 'Mulan,'" *Huozhi Culture*, September 16, 2020.

chemistry” and “fantastical elements,” *Mulan* is hardly criticized by Chinese scholars.<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising that Chinese audiences would not accept Nikola Jean Caro's portrayal of Mulan as a western princess who traveled to China, instead of the local Chinese girl that she was. Caro does not mean to present Mulan in such a way, but due to a lack of cultural background and a slew of stereotypes of Chinese culture, the Mulan in Caro's film seems like a western princess.

Disney was first searching for an Asian director to shoot *Mulan* and they found Ang Lee who later refused Disney as he was promoting his film, *Billy Lynn*. However, Ang Lee did give a suggestion that “it'd be great to see an Asian do it.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, Disney chose Nikola Jean Caro who was born in New Zealand, and presented an outstanding performance in directing the film, *The Whale Rider*, which tells a story of a young girl saving several whales and winning the respect of her grandfather and her people who once looked down on her as she is a woman. When Caro's *Mulan* was released in March 2020, it seemed that Caro not only wanted to repeat the success of *The Whale Rider* and build a similar female hero in *Mulan*, but there were also some scenes that echoed with *The Whale Rider*. Nevertheless, Mulan's story has a totally different historical background from *The Whale Rider*, and Caro's portrayal from the modern perspective was destined to be unsuccessful.<sup>30</sup>

In Caro's film *Mulan*, three virtues are embedded in Hua Mulan: Jinzhong (loyalty), chiyong (bravery), and cunzhen (truth). One of

---

<sup>28</sup> Lu Yuling, “After *Mulan*'s Gala Premiere the Reputation is Revealed, How Do the Overseas Critics Evaluate It?”, GuanCha Syndicate, March 10, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ashley Lee, “Ang Lee on Disney's Live-Action ‘Mulan’: ‘It'd Be Great to See an Asian’ Director,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 22, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Kai Hua, “The Theme of the Director Nicola Caro: Chasing for “True” But Losing ‘Loyalty, Filial Piety and Braveness,’” *Douban Film*, September 12, 2020.



Mulan's most important virtues and also her motive of fighting against the enemy—her filial piety—is lost there. Moreover, most of the scenes are devoted to discussions of “being true,” which clearly violates several aspects of this ancient story. The most serious issue of Mulan replacing her father as a soldier is that she will cheat the emperor. The crime of cheating the emperor would lead to a different kind of punishment and the most severe one is “zhu jiu zu,” which means almost all of the criminal's family members would be killed, including their relatives and servants. Once the punishment is administered, over hundreds or even thousands of people would be killed.<sup>31</sup> That is the reason why it was impossible for Mulan to reveal her identity as a woman during the whole war. Most films uncover Mulan's gender when she is victorious and goes back to her hometown, which is at the very end of the film, without further explanation of the consequences. Caro, however, arranges a scene in the middle of the film, forcing Mulan to acknowledge her female identity in order to be true to herself. Then Mulan comes back to the military camp and keeps fighting as a woman. Despite the explanation given later by the general that he had chosen to forgive her for falsifying her gender because her “loyalty and bravery are without question,” it is still hardly accepted by Chinese audiences.

## **Sacrilegious or Sacrosanct: “Cultural Self-confidence”**

Besides the western elements embedded in *Mulan* which triggered debate and criticism, the careless presentation of Chinese culture also

---

<sup>31</sup> Cai Jiayun, “Why the Criminal's Family and Relatives Will Not Flee When the Criminal is Sentenced to ‘Zhu Jiu Zu’? Because the ‘Zhu Jiu Zu’ in the Past is Different from Your Imagination,” *The Storm Media*, July 24, 2019.

touched the most sensitive nerve of anyone who is familiar with it. The seemingly humorous scenes and plots are undoubtedly interpreted as mocking and smearing the culture itself and what is worse, a provocation towards the Chinese effort to promote "cultural selfconfidence." President Xi Jinping has argued that "the Chinese excellent traditional culture is the spiritual lifeblood of the Chinese nation, the key source of practicing the core socialist values."<sup>32</sup> He points out that if art and literary workers mainly focus on the "anti-historical" and are "anti-Chinese," they will never have further achievement.

A series of patriotic films was shown almost every year after the concept of "cultural self-confidence" was officially announced in 2016, such as *Operation Red Sea* (2015), *Operation Mekong* (2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Amazing China* (2018), *My People, My Country* (2019), and so on.<sup>33</sup> As patriotism is the main theme and requirement these days in China, there is a special term called 主旋律 (the "main melody"), encompassing all the patriotic content, and thus this series of patriotic cinema is called "the main melody" that calls for the cohesiveness of the Chinese nation. It has become almost impossible for foreign films to compete in the Chinese market because, first, Chinese patriotism is at a fever pitch, and secondly domestic films are occupying an increasingly important place in the national culture. To cite Hollywood as an example, only one foreign film had been listed in the Top Ten box office earners in China till the beginning of 2021.<sup>34</sup> All this should have given *Mulan* a sharp

---

<sup>32</sup> Xi Jinping, "Strengthen the Cultural Self-confidence, Developing a Strong Socialist Culture in China," *Qiushi*, June 15, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Kong Zifei, "How the Chinese Film Show the Cultural Self-confidence in the New Era," *Atlantis Press*, 2019.



warning that gaining the success in the Chinese film market may not be an easy task as it was earlier, especially because of the historical mistakes that have been made.

One controversial issue concerns the contradictions contained in the storylines which may aim to show the cultural personality of the Chinese, but they end up as historical mistakes. Most scholars will argue that *Mulan's* story is set during the northern Wei Dynasty (386–534) when *Mulan* joins the Xianbei army to fight against the Rouran Khaganate.<sup>35</sup> It is true that many adaptations will locate the story in a different dynasty, but they hardly contain different elements which would mess up the historical events. However, the film critic Shi Wenxue points out that Caro's *Mulan* is more like "a mixture of eastern elements and symbols from a western view." While the "Fujian Tulou" where *Mulan* grows up actually appears in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the Tai Chi played by the characters appears in the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the makeup "e'huang" mentioned in "The Ballad of *Mulan*" has its origin from the Northern–Southern Dynasties, but it is presented in the film as the "e'huang" makeup in the late Tang Dynasty in a discordant and even ugly way. In Caro's *Mulan*, the "e'huang" makeup is a combination of "e'huang" makeup and "huadian" makeup. In the Northern–Southern Dynasties, women only use one of them as makeup. In the film, it is combined until the late Tang Dynasty. There are two ways of the decoration of "e'huang" makeup.

---

<sup>34</sup> Liang Junjian, "How is the Hollywood Film Losing in Chinese Film Market," *Sohu News*, March 17, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Hu Yuchun, "The Historical Background of Hua *Mulan*, the Battle Between Xianbei and Rouran in the Monan Area," *Shuofangluncong*, Volume 7, November 2019.

<sup>36</sup> "Mulan is Criticized after the Screening, the Critics Point Out that the Plot Doesn't Conform to History," *Dongfang Daily News*, September 13, 2020.



The “e-huang” makeup in *Mulan* (2020) looks discordant and was criticized by many Chinese audiences because of the high saturation level of the color and the wrong place of applying the makeup. This image is sourced from Huayingxiaojiang’s article “The Film *Mulan*, Please Watch What is the Real ‘e’huang’ Makeup.”

One way is to “paste the yellow flower,” which involves the women cutting the golden paper into the shapes of fish, stars, birds, and so on, and then pasting them on their forehead. Another way is using the yellow plum flower to smear the forehead or paint small dots near the eyebrows or temples. It looks like the Chinese character 卐 upside down in the early Northern-Southern Dynasties and later becomes lighter and lighter.<sup>37</sup> What is worthy of mention is that even in the translation of “The Ballad of *Mulan*” by Han H. Frankel, pasting the decoration is translated into “dabs on yellow flower powder” which is different from

---

<sup>37</sup> Huayingxiaojiang, “The Film *Mulan*, Please Watch What is the Real ‘e’huang’ Makeup,” *Bilibili*, September 8, 2020.

what the poem wants to convey.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, neither way of “e’huang” makeup is portrayed right in the film, indicating not only an indifferent attitude towards the presentation of Chinese culture, but also subtle ignorance and disrespect.



The “huang-hua” (yellow flower) is drawn instead of pasting on the forehead of Mulan in Nikola Jean Caro’s film *Mulan* (2020)

## Conclusion

In its original form, “The Ballad of Mulan” consistently attracts thousands of creators from different parts of the world to reimagine and represent it as their own story. From a brave young girl who joins the army for filial piety, to a fearless patriotic female warrior defending her motherland, Mulan has grown far beyond the Ballad. She has become a perfect mirror reflecting the Chinese historical and political environment.

Within China, during the Republic of China, she was the mouthpiece of left-wing filmmakers who longed for a way to rescue the country from turmoil, and called for peace under the rule of the

---

<sup>38</sup> Zhao Yanchun, “The Appreciation of Different Versions of the Translation of the Ballad of Mulan,” *The English World*, September 15, 2020.

Guomindang. Upon entering the New China, she speaks out about the last hope of creating a utopia where the conflict between the left-wing and the right-wing would finally come to an end. But the filmmakers of the time still could not build a true and accurately-depicted female hero under the norms of Chinese traditional values. After the openness and reforms with capitalism, the entry of new minds, and the coming to power of Xi Jinping, there arrived a new concept of “cultural self-confidence” which brought new political and cultural ideologies to China. Created in such a complicated environment, Disney's *Mulan* should have taken Chinese culture much more seriously, especially after it had put in so much effort to satisfy the political requirement of acknowledging a unified China especially on the issue of Xinjiang.

The most famous warrior-heroine in China, Hua Mulan, has not found her identity as a woman under constant political conflict over the course of a century. With her identity in continual flux, she leaves researchers with questions not just from the past and the present, but also about the future—hers, of China's politics, and of women's status because all of these socio-political variables are interlinked. A clue to what lies ahead can be gleaned from her stepping out of China in 1998 to embrace the world, resulting in the success of the 1998 Disney animated feature film, *Mulan*, which indicates the infinite possibilities for the Hua Mulan story, as well as the future of Chinese film which has roots in a rich history.

### ***Note on the Author***

**Jing Chen** is currently studying theater at Wake Forest University, North Carolina, United States. She is broadly interested in modern China studies, gender studies in the Chinese context, and East Asian cinema studies. As a co-author, her essay “Human-Elephant Conflict



in China: A Review of Current Management Strategies and Future Directions” has appeared in *China Global Dialogue*, and her article “The Emperor is a Woman!’ Changing Representations of Empress Wu in Chinese Popular Culture, 1939–2010,” in *Rising Asia Journal*.