



**“A Girl Worth Fighting For”:  
Transculturation, Remediation, and  
Cultural Authenticity in Adaptations  
of the “Ballad of Mulan”**

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## Abstract

Since its first feature-length film, Disney has been (ab)using beloved folktales and legends by revising them to its corporate predilections. Amassing billions of dollars in the process, it has not taken into account the alternate pedagogies and surrogate histories created as a result. Under the guise of “experts” and creators of “timeless classics,” Disney has been able to prosper by drastically altering texts that are culturally significant and prevalent. Focusing on one particular film, Disney’s 1998 feature, *Mulan*, I will demonstrate how Disney, through its creation of what it would defend as a satiation of global tastes, is instead crafting alternate narratives that no longer convey the original text’s message or meaning. Though the main source text of Disney’s animated feature is Robert San Souci’s *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior*, both of these texts (film and children’s book) are adaptations of the “Ballad of Mulan”, an ancient poem that traces back to the Chinese Southern and Northern Dynasties. The range of positions adopted by the composers of these two texts (with the Ballad as the original) not only demarcates retelling, adaptation, and remediation, but also bears consideration of outsider authorship and seems to indicate divergent sensibilities and authoritative relationships. The transformations engendered by these contrasting iterations of Mulan (self-interested fairytale princess, warrior woman, filial daughter) compel an investigation into the sociocultural and pedagogical influence of each of these respective mediums (animated film, children’s literature, poetry), while also unmistakably sully Disney as the iniquitous adapter.

**Keywords:** Mulan, adaptation, pedagogy, Disney, Disneyfication, transculturation, mediation, authenticity

To the multi-billion dollar conglomerate that is The Walt Disney Company, cultural authenticity (by which this essay means fidelity to the cultural referents or tenets of the original text) can be discarded in preference for financially viable entertainment. In 1998, Walt Disney Feature Animation released *Mulan*, claiming that Chinese culture had been thoroughly researched, so much so that this picture could be understood as an authentic slice of ancient history. The main source text for the animated feature, Robert San Souci’s *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998), is yet another remediation of the “Ballad of Mulan”, an ancient poem which traces back to China’s Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589). The range of positions, with respect to cultural authenticity, embraced by the adapters of these two texts (with the Ballad as the original) not only demarcates retelling, adaptation, and remediation, but also raises concerns of outsider authorship and appears to signal deviating attitudes and authoritative relationships. Mulan, in these three texts, plays the part of filial daughter, self-interested fairytale princess, and woman warrior, each with distinctive ambitions. The changes brought about by these particular versions of Mulan bring into question the socio-cultural and pedagogical importance of each of their respective mediums (poetry, children’s literature, and animated film). Whilst San Souci’s version of Mulan represents an attempt to captivate contemporary readers by combining multiple

ancient Chinese texts with native illustrations while remaining loyal to the narrative's cultural authenticity, Disney drastically alters the narrative to satiate what it believes are global tastes, fashioning another of the company's soi-disant "timeless classics." Adapters should not necessarily be held accountable to responsibly tailor their remediations with respect to cultural authenticity or appropriate revisions. However, Disney itself utilized marketing materials championing the extensive cultural research prepared for *Mulan*. If Disney did not trivialize traditional Chinese cultural symbols and referents, a credible and perhaps globally successful adaptation could have had a more profound effect. When compared to San Souci's remediation of the original "Ballad of Mulan", a treatment respectful of its source text, Disney's animated feature and its ardent incorporation of Western ideology appear exploitative and imperialist in nature.

In San Souci's retelling of the Chinese ballad, he includes a full two pages (in a children's book, nonetheless) of how he approached adapting the original text, from his thoughts on the original poem, his details repossessed from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and why he employed specific English translations of lines from the ballad. The illustrations, beautifully drawn by husband-and-wife team Jean and Mou-Sien Tseng, who were raised themselves on the original "Ballad of Mulan", represent an attempt by San Souci to additionally legitimize the cultural authenticity of his remediation. His scholarly background further constitutes his adaptation, studying folklore in graduate school and retelling other legends, including *Six Foolish Fishermen* and two different interpretations of the Cinderella folktale (*Cinderella Skeleton*, *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella*). Disney claims that it employed San Souci as an important consultant when crafting their animated feature, but it is difficult to comprehend how vastly inconsistent the film is in its adherence to, not only to the original source text, but to San Souci's book as well. Disney, which here can be understood more broadly as an agent of Western cultural imperialism, skews not only the original ballad's message, but also the audience's reception. Hsieh and Matoush note that because authentic Chinese rituals do not determine the tastes of the film, spectators cannot fully engage with genuine cultural diversity (220). In fact, by disseminating western ideologies for the sake of profit abroad, only the corporate interests of Disney are truly being served. Under the guise of expanding the diverse cultural knowledge of its audience (spreading

“culturally authentic” narratives), Disney completely upends the source text’s themes, as well as attributing any controversial elements of the film to its notion of the regimented patriarchal society that was “feudal China.”

Though Disney does misrepresent many characteristics of the original “Ballad of Mulan” and also of Chinese culture as a whole, the difficulty in adapting such texts should first be brought to attention. Henry Jenkins, in his response to the September 2011 issue of *Cultural Studies*, points out that:

... In expanding the diversity of our culture, I have also developed a deeper appreciation for all of the systemic and structural challenges we face in changing the way established institutions operate, all of the outmoded and entrenched thinking which make even the most reasonable reform of established practices difficult to achieve. (272)

Although Jenkins is specifically speaking of the emergence of a networked culture, his sentiments also hold true in their application to the adaptation of ancient texts of culturally rich dynasties. By adapting a socially significant and still eminent text, Disney was taking a propitious risk, counting on the film’s popularity outside of China to overwhelm any negative critiques from these “outmoded and entrenched” thinkers that Jenkins references. However, this left its remediation open to criticism by the defenders of fidelity discourse, specifically those native to the original ballad’s homeland. Disney’s *Mulan* differs so enormously from both the original text and San Souci’s book that it is hard to defend the company from these naysayers, even while acknowledging Jenkins’ appreciation of the challenges that adapting authors often face. The film grossed over \$300 million worldwide and earned both Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations, but failed at the box office in China, the source text’s origin nation. Perhaps this was mere misfortune, but Disney’s first attempt to draw on an Asian story (though they had adapted numerous folktales and legends at that point) comes from a poem that thousands of Chinese children can recite, as it is requisite in many standardized textbooks in Chinese elementary schools. In Mingwu Xu and Chuanmao Tian’s case study of *Mulan*, they inform the reader:

It [the “Ballad of Mulan”] has been officially included in Chinese textbooks for primary schools in mainland China in the past decades, which gives rise to the

fact that all educated Chinese people know the heroic deeds of Mulan, and are even able to recite the ballad. (188)

The widespread understanding of this source text ensured that any variation of the Chinese's deeply entrenched beliefs would be highly criticized, and the fact that Disney's remediation was neither socioculturally authentic nor historically accurate guaranteed that it would not be well received in China. When taking a closer look at Disney's *Mulan*, the distorted representations of Chinese culture begin to emerge more noticeably.

Jay David Bolter, in his essay on remediation and new media, argues that remediation was never meant to be a purely formal concept: "The borrowing of representational practices always has social, ideological, and economic as well as aesthetic dimensions" (27). As an example, he briefly mentions the use of the techniques of blockbuster filmmaking to broaden a film's appeal to a large audience in order to pay for the enormous production costs. San Souci, in his children's book retelling of the "Ballad of Mulan" is able to uphold the cultural authenticity, even including another relevant Chinese text, whilst creating a remediation that expands the folktale's global audience. His focus, even as an outsider author, remains steadfast in keeping his adaptation authentic and historically precise, rather than giving consideration to any notion of grandiose profits. However, Disney, making use of these aforementioned blockbuster filmmaking techniques, must make narrative, thematic, and stylistic choices to appeal to a mass, globalized audience and simply fill the extra channels that the cinematic mode has to offer. In this case, Disney also appropriates certain elements of Chinese culture and completely eliminates or changes essential aspects of the original ballad. In the opening credits sequence, the audience is presented with three stereotypical Chinese elements: the calligraphy brushwork that creates a mountain range on rice paper, an orchestral version of the film's opening song "Honor to Us All," which employs aspects of traditional Chinese music, giving the audience an impression of music from "the Other," and an image of the Great Wall of China. Although none of these elements are present in the source text, Disney takes liberties in filling the aural and visual channels that were not available to the original poem, producing a sense of faux Asian authenticity from the onset of the narrative through a prioritization of clichéd and generalized symbolism over legitimate cultural referents.

This Westernization of a Chinese legend, with the addition of recognizable and often stereotypical references to Chinese culture across history, results in the film working against the authenticity and unanimity of historical facts regarding China. The tension between authenticity and liberal remediation, as well as the debate between fidelity to culture and the fidelity of the author, both factor in to Disney's remediating process, and would obscure the intentions of any adaptation. However, any debate regarding artistic remixing and the creative commons immediately ceases when Disney attempts to copyright beloved cultural tales and icons that have been passed down from ancient ancestors. Disney appropriates a highly respected piece of international culture and distorts it to various degrees with their adaptation techniques; a process which Xu and Tian define as "cultural deformation" (191). Disney's *Mulan* contains countless misrepresentations of important elements of Chinese culture. Some examples are as follows: The matchmaker-interview ritual that Mulan, and all women in China, must endure did not exist in feudal China. By including this matchmaker ritual, the film pits Mulan against the strict traditions of Chinese culture, even though this ceremony was not included in the original text, or within ancient China altogether. Yin contends, "in Disney's appropriation, Chinese culture was ridiculed as strictly preventing girls from achieving their non-traditional potentials," a scenario regularly used to depict non-Western cultures in Disney films of the period (61). The Huns, erroneously depicted as Mongols in the film, were, in reality, a Turkic people (in relation to the time period of the Ballad, an Uyghur tribe from Northern Wei). The sacred and mighty dragon symbol is reduced to Mu Shu, a comical lizard voiced by the American actor, Eddie Murphy. That he is named after a common Chinese dish, which would be familiar to American audiences, further denounces the royal cultural symbolism of the dragon. In the "Ballad of Mulan", Mulan receives the blessings of her parents to leave, who both understand her father is not fit to go to war. Disney drastically departs from this narrative detail, as Mulan steals her father's armor and sword and escapes into the dark of night. While this may seem like a small discrepancy, Mulan's direct disobedience of her father's wishes in the animated version is significant due to familial relations and order being of the utmost importance within traditional Chinese culture. As Yin notes, "When summoned by her country, Mulan felt obligated to serve in her father's place" due to her devotion to her father, not through any derived narrative of

self-exploration or rebellion (66). Intentionally defying a father's wishes would be a grave sin as is evidenced in the original poem, in which Mulan carefully prepares for the war, travelling to various markets to purchase a horse, whip, bridle, and saddle, before riding off to join the army.

In addition, Mulan would not have had to cut her hair to blend in with the other male warriors, as after childhood, men and women both wore their hair long, so she would have easily fit in with the other male soldiers, especially sporting bulky and ornate battle gear. The Chinese believed that their hair and skin were extensions of their parents and were precious gifts that should not be damaged. Furthermore, regarding imprecise translations, it would be ludicrous for Mulan to name her horse Khan, as that title was reserved only for the emperor, who is referred to in the original ballad as "The Khan." No other person, let alone an animal, could ever be hallowed with such a monumental designation. The film's suggestion that Mulan could not conform to the stereotypical roles society attributed to women was false as well. The first lines of the poem suggest that Mulan was fully qualified to complete the domestic work traditionally assigned to Chinese women of the period, and would never have felt out of place, as she does in the film ("I will never pass as a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter", Mulan sings in "Reflection"). The ballad also states that Mulan fought hundreds of battles for her country over twelve years, earning promotions in rank because of her dedication and skill. She was not "found out" until after the war was over, and even if her gender was discovered during the war, she would not have been killed, as Disney's *Mulan* claims. There were other female generals and brave soldiers in Chinese history, and women were sanctioned to serve in the army. Instead of twelve years of distinguished combat, Mulan's transformation from a neophyte soldier into an authority on all forms of mortal combat in the film is represented through the common Hollywood technique of a training montage. "By ignoring the internal diversity of Chinese culture and inaccurately representing Chinese and other Asian cultures," Yin remarks, "Disney essentially portrays non-Western cultures as monolithic Others and perpetuates the racial hierarchy" (65). This preparation montage, commonplace to Western audiences, perfectly represents Disney's implementation of Western filmic techniques, themes, and ideologies into the original Mulan story, deforming

its cultural authenticity and using the archetypal Disney formula to transform a classic cultural text into a “timeless” canon.

The American film theorist Robert Stam, in his introduction to the theory and practice of adaptation, argues that film as a medium is “ideally equipped,” with its multitrack and multiformat type, to “magically multiply times and spaces” (21). While Disney certainly takes liberties in filling these extra tracks in *Mulan*, even attempting to convince the audience of their quest for authenticity, instead of “multiplying” the themes of the original Chinese poem, its selective approach to Chinese culture and history ensures that cultural details are often either wholly inaccurate or overlaid with Western ideologies. This process has become known as what scholars popularly define as “Disneyfication.” Stam raises the pertinent question: “Are magical stories best rendered as animated cartoons?” (16). Disney believes so, and has gone even further, adapting stories that are not magical at all into their library of “instant classics”, all of which involve elements of magic to a greater or lesser degree. Disney’s “revival” of classic folktales and legends could be classified as what Michel Foucault calls “reactivation.” In his now seminal essay “What Is an Author?” Foucault defines reactivation as “the insertion of discourse into totally new domains of generalization, practice, and transformations” (134). By introducing the traditional Chinese narrative of the “Ballad of Mulan” into the magical world of Disney, and in doing so, framing it within Western ideologies, it replaces its original context and cultural referents with predominantly erroneous Orientalist stereotypes of what the Occident perceives the Chinese (and Eastern) culture(s) to be, and in doing so merely reduces a culturally-significant narrative to the newest addition in Disney’s catalogue. This Disneyfication process, is able to formulaically transform any text into, as Hsieh and Matoush note, the “European fairy-tale structure that they have become famous for” (219). Favoring a Eurocentric vision that is presented by cultural outsiders, Disney makes the conscious decision that they will forgo culturally authentic aspects of the original text and use their proven method to pursue another box office success.

In *Mulan*, Disney personalizes the events by collapsing them into the tale of an individual heroine who makes the impossible possible, overcoming overwhelming odds both in war and with regard to sociocultural



norms, and who emerges as a national heroine. As Xu and Tian explain, this Disney formula “generally includes individualism, the triumph of good over evil, young romance and the use of animals as sidekicks” (183). Mulan’s journey of self-discovery, in which she triumphs over the Hun leader, is able to upend the sexist roles for women within ancient Chinese society, and win the heart of a brave and dashing military captain, all while being assisted by a comical dragon/lizard, spirited horse, and lucky cricket, could not further exemplify these fundamental elements of the Disneyfication process. None of these aforementioned elements are even alluded to in the “Ballad of Mulan”, however, as Disney asserts its Western influence in this remediation. Henry Jenkins, in his *Convergence Culture*, reviews the paradox of commodifying tastes:

Here’s the paradox: to be desired by the networks is to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group’s cultural visibility. Those groups that have no recognized economic value get ignored. That said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. These groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass-produced and mass marketed. One cannot help but have conflicted feelings because one doesn’t want to go unrepresented – but one doesn’t want to be exploited either. (277)

Although the primary goal of Disney is economic gain through entertainment, it should not be forgotten that Disney, no matter how convoluted the final product may be, is claiming to present a culturally authentic story to a global audience and with that claim comes educational responsibilities – particularly when one considers the age of the intended demographic. It may be argued that, though the narrative has been so vastly altered that the original text’s influence is unidentifiable aside from the shared title, the base idea may be wholesome. However, as Jenkins points out, there is a fine line between raising a cultural group’s visibility and exploiting their traditional stories for capital gains. A major part of this Disney formula is the innovation, enhancement, and modification of fairy tales, legends, and fictions borrowed from other cultures in its animated features. This exploitation of treasured stories and tales from culturally-rich societies and civilizations for profit is a troubling form of adaptation, and unfortunately has often been (ab)used by Disney over the last several decades.

Joseph Chan uses the term “transculturation” in his study of the adaptation of *Mulan*. He defines it as a “process whereby a culture is transformed by another for self-aggrandizement. It is analogous to the conceptions of cultural adaptation, acculturation and assimilation in cross-cultural communication” (185). Though there are many instances of positive cross-cultural communication, including San Souci’s children’s book, which is said to have inspired Disney’s *Mulan*, Disney’s films give rise to cultural hybridization and intercultural conflict (Arab-Americans with *Aladdin* [1992], African-Americans with *The Lion King* [1994], Native Americans with *Pocahontas* [1995]). In these instances, Disney is not fostering fruitful sociocultural connections; instead, it is simply exploiting these various texts for financial gains. However, this misuse of the original text and its themes has become routine within Hollywood, as Stam explains:

In the case of Hollywood blockbusters, including those based on pre-existing sources like novels or comic books, the text becomes overwhelmed, as it were, by a commercial paratext. The film becomes a kind of franchise or brand, designed to generate not only sequels but also ancillary consumer products like toys, music, books, and other products of cross-media synergies. (28)

In the same thread, Disney, with many of its animated feature adaptations, is appropriating non-Western materials (taking advantage of the exotic appeal of “the Other”) and abstracting them out of their cultural milieus and framing them within Western ideological summa. In the case of *Mulan*, from a political economic standpoint alone, Disney has exploited the powerful girl image that had been created as a “product of the profit-driven practice in the media industry,” as Mimi Nguyen notes, to take financial advantage of the growing female market (15). For Disney, transforming “ethnic” texts into multi-product lines which include auxiliary merchandise such as toys, clothing, and licensing deals is not new, as it has used and continues to employ this commercial paratext as a cross-promoting technique to attract more consumers. And it is this exploitation of culturally-rich narratives that reveals a much more troubling trend within Western culture.

Julianne Burton-Carvajal, in her essay on Disney and American foreign policy, believes that this appropriation is not merely symptomatic of Disney’s culturally dominant ideology but, rather, that this process

of universalization which, “imposes the perspectives or values of the dominant on the dominated, and does not allow the dominated to use their own perspectives or values,” is in fact the norm for Western culture (139). The West’s supposed need to transform ethnic materials into universal texts assumes that the culture adopting the original resources is the dominant culture. By constructing themselves as the dominant culture, the West, using this universalization process, then imposes their ideologies and cultural capital onto the presumed abnormal “Other.” Disney, justifying its approach under the pretext of entertainment, has fully assumed the authority to tell the story of not only *Mulan*, but countless other texts emanating from a range of cultures, including *Pocahontas*, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Aladdin*, to audiences around the world. In taking this authoritative stance, Disney is confident in the overwhelming power of pop culture. These Disneyfied accounts of classic texts, in making use of popular culture, are thus able to convince audiences that these ideologically altered representations are genuine and true ethnographic accounts, rather than a representation of the West’s dominance in adopting the said texts.

*Mulan*’s 1998 release was the one of the final adaptations of a cultural tale during Disney’s Renaissance, an era which began with *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 and concluded with *Tarzan* (1999). This period, often referred to as “New Disney” by cinema scholars, marked a distinct positioning of Disney as a defender of Western values against an evil Other. The original opening soundtrack to *Aladdin*, with the lyrics “Where the caravan camels roam / Where they cut off your ear / If they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric but hey it’s home,” establishes the setting of the fictional Middle Eastern city of Agrabah as dangerous and uncivilized. These lyrics, altered only after the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee voiced its concern with the bigoted lines, still contain the lines “It’s barbaric but hey it’s home,” setting up the dichotomy between Western and Eastern civilizations. Additionally, Disney routinely exploits arranged marriage scenarios in which the woman has no agency – obfuscating traditional American values with feminism in many animated features of this period. Whereas *Aladdin*’s Jasmine refuses to marry a suitor set up by her father, the Sultan, eventually wedding the story’s former street urchin, Aladdin, *Pocahontas* similarly denies her father Chief Powhatan’s wishes to wed the serious warrior Kocoum in favor of forming a relationship with

the Jamestown settler, John Smith in *Pocahontas*. Though not marketing these features around its cultural research and commitment to authenticity, in regularly discounting important details from these stories or disregarding historical accounts, Disney deliberately pits American principles of democracy against the traditional cultures depicted in each of these films. When integrated with the various generalized stereotypes and unfavorable social characterizations, these earlier works of the era further reinforce the cultural misappropriation clearly present in *Mulan* and targeted at its primarily American audiences.

Filmic texts, as Stam points out, are hypertexts derived from pre-existing hypotexts, which have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization, and actualization (28). While Disney is indeed using all of these operations in its transforming of the “Ballad of Mulan”, there is a marked difference between these operations and a complete ideological reconstruction of the source text. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, in his essay on Disney and Japanese cultural imperialism, argues that “the most prevalent image of cultural imperialism is that of a hegemonic power, such as the United States, trying to indoctrinate and brainwash the population of periphery regions” (190). While the term “brainwashing” may seem exaggerated, is it not more outlandish that Disney would try to present China with an ideologically different version of their traditional beloved text as being factual? By decontextualizing and uprooting the Chinese story of Mulan, Disney is presenting the world with what may be perceived as a “timeless” canonical work, but which only includes superficial elements of Chinese culture to guarantee that a fascia of otherness remains for its primarily Western audience. In *Mulan*, as Feng remarks, Disney presents traditional Chinese culture as an “Oriental despotism” that is hostile to individual freedom and feminism (240). Traditional Chinese culture is illustrated in resistance to the ideological concept of individualism and therefore also the impediment to gender equality.

Mulan is transformed, from self-sacrificing, devoted, filial, and faithful heroine in both the original Chinese Ballad and San Souci’s book, into the individualistic girl who is desperately trying to break away from a regimented Chinese culture seen in Disney’s adaptation. In the original “Ballad of Mulan”, reflecting broader traditional Chinese culture, Mulan, as Jing Yin writes, is able to achieve self-perfection by transforming her private ego to an all-embracing self that encompasses all human beings (69). An essential

principle in ancient Chinese culture was the concept of filial piety, and this is what drives Mulan to take her father's place in the war. Filial piety represents showing love, respect, courtesy and support for one's parents, engaging in proper conduct to bring honor to one's parents and ancestors, and, contrary to Disney's *Mulan*, obedience. Considered paramount within the central Han Chinese culture and the ultimate value that upheld the family structure, these philosophies of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships have existed since the time of Confucius. Weiming Tu, in his essay on Confucian moral discourse, points out that within the traditional Ballad, Mulan represents "the extraordinary hero in a collectivistic culture, who embodies the Chinese ethos that the worth of a person is determined by whether one strives to fulfill one's obligations to the family and the society" (303). Disney subverts this crucial aspect of the Ballad by having Mulan unequivocally embrace Western values, in effect making her culturally superior to the traditional Chinese female, whom she harshly juxtaposes. This quest of "finding oneself," Hsieh and Matoush observe, is an inherently modern American concept and an honorable ambition from a Western viewpoint, but it conflicts with East Asian perspectives regarding the "more communal nature of the self" (219). By incorporating values such as independence, individualism, and feminism, Mulan is breaking away from the ultraconservative, conventional depiction of the traditional Chinese societal hierarchy. This portrayal of a Chinese culture that is sexist, excessively patriarchal, and one which punishes any women who seek gender equality, is exaggerated to the point of obscurity, and is neither representative of the source text nor traditional Chinese social attitudes. However, this is the exact battle that takes place in the narrative of Disney's *Mulan* – Mulan, as an individual, fighting against an evil Chinese cultural collective that represses her inner feelings and abilities.

This "powerful girl image" that Disney is able to exploit for its financial benefit also presents a disconcerting illustration of feminism. Despite the celebration of the independence of Mulan, some of the film's subsidiary products, such as dolls sold with the "Deluxe Dress Up Set" or the "Palace Play Set," strictly confine Mulan to clichéd femininity and traditional Western gender stereotypes, as Yin notes (57). The expression of feminism within the film is limited, and at times completely contradictory, in order not to upset the dominant patriarchal ideological structure still present within the West. Mikhail Bakhtin suggested that in

every age there are adaptations, remediations, and retellings that re-accentuate, in their own ways, the works of the past. Disney's *Mulan* is no different, in that it is undoubtedly a product of its age. Mulan is principally a strong female figure because she is portrayed in contrast to a China that is denoted as a harshly sexist culture, while in reality the culture(s) of the period suggested in the narrative resembled nothing close to Disney's interpretation. An illustration of this point may be seen in the depiction of Mulan's family, specifically her father. In the film, Mulan's family simultaneously represents love and an impediment to her free will, complicating the role of the family unit. After Mulan runs away in order to prevent her elderly and hobbled father from going to war her father claims that Mulan is a late blooming flower, and "when it blooms, it will be the most beautiful of all." Similarly, when Mulan returns home from war with the gifts of Shan Yu's sword and the Emperor's crest, he throws them to the ground, exclaiming "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter!" While it is clear he loves her, these tender moments contradict the scenes in which he advocates the oppressive Chinese tradition that restrains Mulan from speaking out as an equal, Yin remarks (61). Although, in terms of characters, the general's assistant, Chi-Fu, represents the epitome of this oppressive tradition, with comments which include "You would do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence" and "She's a woman; she'll never be worth anything," it is Mulan's father who embodies the contradictory stance on feminism that Disney analogously holds.

Throughout *Mulan*'s narrative, he plays conflicting roles, at times a loving and understanding father and at others a totalitarian figure of authority. His fixation on honor appears to override his love for Mulan. Only when Mulan returns home with the highest possible battle honors does he truly accept her as his own, which skews him toward the ultraconservative, traditional father-figure role. Though he tosses these tokens to the ground, his character is not granted sufficient development to presuppose this heartwarming metamorphosis. Disney, by co-opting feminism, evokes what Roland Barthes calls "inoculation," defined as acknowledging a small amount of evil within an institution so as to ward off awareness of its fundamental problem. By transforming feminism into the perpetuation of individualism and racial hierarchy, as Nguyen contends (12), Disney avoids directly addressing the overall issue and by diminishing feminism into a mere

cultural phenomenon, specifically within this non-Western sphere, it only has to incorporate a few notions of gender equality, without profoundly challenging the patriarchal sociocultural structure that would intimidate its male audience. Disney overcomes gender oppression by rendering it as a culturally exclusive issue, a specifically Chinese concern. Mulan represents two sides of a coin in which each side represents contrasting traditions, both skewed toward favoring Disney's Western ideology. On one side, Mulan is the Western heroine, finding her inner self and saving China from the villainous Huns who nearly kidnap the Emperor. On the other side, she represents a victim of all Chinese traditions and institutions, rebelling against an oppressive Chinese culture, fighting for gender equality and changing the opinions of her authoritarian father. No matter which side of this metaphorical coin lands face up, Disney is satisfied: either their formula has been successful, or the depiction of an evil "Other" blinds the viewer to any questionable moral or social contradictions. In using this strategy, Disney sacrifices any authentic Chinese elements and contaminates the original "Ballad of Mulan" with Western ideologies and unflattering, parochial Chinese representations. San Souci's *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior*, on the other hand, is able to interlace authentic Chinese elements, both in the original poem and within Chinese history, without sacrificing any essential themes or condemning traditional Chinese culture.

Stam proficiently explains the feeling of betrayal audiences experience when an adaptation is not loyal to the source material:

When we say an adaptation has been "unfaithful" to the original, the very violence of the term gives expression to the intense sense of betrayal we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, or aesthetic features of its literary source. (14)

In this particular case, as Disney's primary viewership consists of mass audiences outside of mainland China who are unlikely to have heard of Mulan before, the feeling of betrayal would not have been present. However, it is puzzling to note that the production team of Disney's *Mulan* employed San Souci as a "major consultant" when developing their animated film. With his *Fa Mulan*, Hsieh and Matoush write, San Souci positions

himself as an outside adapter, creating a hybrid version rather than a faithful rendering of the classic “Ballad of Mulan” (217). Compared to Disney’s irreverence for the original text, though, San Souci’s adaptation looks as though it has been approached as an authentic adaptation. He makes use of artists practicing traditional Chinese art techniques for his book’s illustrations, in the scroll and Chinese calligraphy, and incorporates other authentic Chinese texts, including Tzu’s *The Art of War* and an additional legendary female warrior figure, the Maiden of Yueh, which preceded Mulan’s story by several centuries. With the addition of these two integrated Chinese materials, San Souci’s adaptive approach turns his book away from filial piety and loyalty and more toward Mulan’s transformation into a warrior woman, as the title suggests. However, there is still a strong sense of family loyalty and honor within the adapted text, as Mulan obtains permission from her parents to go to war because they all agree that it is the only way to save the family.

San Souci, taking an outsider’s adaptive approach to his retelling of the “Ballad of Mulan”, reinterprets the theme of filial piety by portraying Mulan as a girl who strives to become an idealized “woman warrior,” as Hsieh and Matoush note (218), and to follow in the footsteps of fellow warrior women Maiden of Yueh. Unlike Disney’s transition from novice to warrior in the form of a training montage, San Souci, from the outset of his text, places Mulan in the role of aspiring warrior. Shown feigning swordplay with a bamboo shaft, Mulan makes her ambitions clear. After entering the army, San Souci’s narrative describes how Mulan studied books on the art of war to craft her skills in combat, and portrays her rise through the ranks to the position of general, as she gains experience in myriad battles throughout the twelve-year war. Though San Souci, in his notes at the end of this text, admits to a greater interest in the art of war than filial piety, he nevertheless includes a further reference to Mulan’s filial duty whilst she is in the army, when her dreams of returning home are pushed aside by her sense of duty and honor to her family. This choice, employed to emphasize Mulan’s transformation to warrior woman instead of filial piety, as Hsieh and Matoush remark, can be seen to symbolically represent an adapter’s conviction that sociocultural realities are fluid and that cross-cultural communications mediated by translation are somewhat hybrid in nature (218). However, unlike Disney’s hybridization of fabricated Chinese cultural elements within a Western ideological frame, San Souci presents



a culturally authentic adaptation of the original “Ballad of Mulan” that, while adapting and conflating aspects of source material and culture, nevertheless remains true to its essential tenets.

Though demonstrating, intentionally or otherwise, there is a happy intermediate between authenticity and remediation, San Souci’s *Fa Mulan* still contains variations to the source text. The three key additions or alterations to the Chinese poem that San Souci includes all make the text more accessible to children, specifically in the Western world. He, like Disney, includes the Khan’s prevention of allowing women in the army, though without the “punishment by death” exaggeration that the filmic adaptation includes. San Souci’s text also employs the haircutting sequence, most likely in order to appease a Western audience, as most are unlikely to know that men and women kept their hair long during the time period in which the book takes place. Finally, with his switch in emphasis to the art of war, San Souci, for much of the book, includes beautiful battle illustrations and describes how Mulan led the army that defeated the Huns during the twelve-year war. The first of these three flourishes emphasizes the risk that Mulan took in accomplishing her goal of becoming a warrior woman, instilling in the reader a similar sense that Disney conveyed through centering on Mulan’s traits of individualism. Unlike Disney’s removal of almost any ties to filial piety, San Souci’s form of individualism, as in the traditional Chinese culture, favors communal interpersonal relationships, as depicted in Mulan’s relationship with her family, as well as her fellow soldiers (“fireside companions”), within the book. Hsieh and Matoush allege that though this particular adaptation may leave many Chinese who are steeped in Confucian principles somewhat perplexed (218), San Souci’s retelling of the “Ballad of Mulan” is deeply entrenched in the dominant Chinese socio-cultural fabric of the story, fashioning it as a free, yet culturally authentic, remediation.

Ultimately, Mulan, whether as a filial daughter, individualistic fairytale princess, or woman warrior, is a compelling protagonist. However, when issues of appropriation and exploitation are raised, San Souci’s textual retelling for children of the original poem integrates germane cultural works and adheres to its source text’s central tenets, while Disney’s focus on individualism, both in its remediation of the Ballad and its egocentric business model fixates solely on company profits, and exposes them as an insatiable corporation

with no regard for cultural authenticity. With both adaptations, choices must be made regarding sociocultural, economic, and pedagogical functions within the retellings. Though Disney's animated feature *Mulan* is undeniably entertaining in its use of music, characterization, and traditional plot arc, San Souci's book adaptation for children treats the source text with far greater respect in that it does not force dominant Western ideologies into an already culturally rich text. If only Disney's production team had, as *Mulan* does in their filmic remediation, prayed to their ancestors to "help not make a fool of me," perhaps Chinese and American spectators alike could appreciate the film's entertaining twist on a portrait of authentic cultural history. However, Disney's ill-advised and at times immature treatment of a classic and canonical Chinese narrative results from its prioritization of profit and entertainment, and sullies an opportunity for authentic cross-cultural harmonization.

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