

Analyzing Disney Mulan's Hero's Journey in Terms of Literature

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Abstract: This study analyzes the reinvention of heroism and gender identity in Disney's *Mulan* (1998), an animated adaptation of the Chinese mythology of Hua Mulan. *Mulan* diverges from conventional storylines that exalt masculine power and martial prowess, focusing instead on themes of heroism, self-discovery, and the subversion of strict gender standards. The film amplifies a female protagonist who defies cultural norms, critiquing traditional heroics and redefining greatness via resilience, intellect, and ethical purity. This study utilizes qualitative textual analysis and Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework to examine how *Mulan* subverts patriarchal tropes, establishing personal sincerity and inner power as the genuine criteria of heroism. This study examines feminist and postcolonial critiques of classical storytelling, asserting that *Mulan* reinterprets old myth as a modern metaphor of empowerment, demonstrating how contemporary adaptations can reclaim traditional narratives to embody progressive ideas. The video serves as a radical act of mythopoetic resistance, presenting an alternative conception of heroism that surpasses gender and cultural limitations.

Keywords: Disney; Hero; Literature; *Mulan*

1. Introduction

Heroic narratives have historically functioned as cultural benchmarks, influencing social ideas of valor, honor, and identity. The legend of Hua Mulan—a woman who masquerades as a male to assume her father's role in combat—serves as a formidable challenge to conventional gender roles. While traditional heroism frequently venerates male soldiers and martial skill, *Mulan*'s narrative presents an alternative form of valor—one founded on sacrifice, ingenuity, and the defiance of restrictive conventions. Disney's *Mulan* (1998) reinterprets an old Chinese song, merging mythology with contemporary values to create a narrative that challenges strict gender binaries and redefines heroism through emotional complexity and individual autonomy.

Mulan diverges from conventional Disney princess narratives that prioritize romance or fate, instead highlighting self-actualization and defiance. The titular protagonist, originally limited by cultural norms of gender, ultimately demonstrates that courage transcends masculine and physical power. Her story underscores inventiveness, tenacity, and moral

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courage as the essential pillars of greatness. This transition corresponds with modern feminist rhetoric, which contests the marginalization of women from heroic archetypes (Helford 2000; Davis 2006). Academic analysis of *Mulan* frequently scrutinizes its gender dynamics, with critics such as Dong (2006) investigating the film's navigation between Eastern and Western cultural norms, while Li (2020) investigates its subversion of the "warrior hero" archetype. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of works that contextualize *Mulan* within the expansive framework of mythic narrative, especially regarding its interaction with and subversion of Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*.

Campbell's monomyth, while impactful, has been criticized for its androcentric slant, frequently sidelining female and non-Western heroic narratives (Pearson & Pope 1981; Frankel 2017). The narrative structure of *Mulan* simultaneously conforms to and challenges Campbell's paradigm; it follows the conventional call to adventure, trials, and return, however reinterprets these stages through the perspectives of gender transgression and cultural resistance. The film's ending, in which *Mulan* relinquishes her disguise and embraces her authentic identity to rescue China, redefines heroism as self-acceptance and collective leadership rather than conquest.

This study enhances current scholarship by examining *Mulan* as a transformational mythopoetic text that deconstructs traditional heroism while revitalizing old mythology for contemporary audiences. This paper examines how Disney's adaptation contests patriarchal standards, reinterprets the *Hero's Journey*, and establishes an inclusive image of heroism. By emphasizing *Mulan*'s emotional and psychological conflicts, the film contends that genuine power resides in authenticity, contesting the gendered dichotomies that have traditionally shaped heroic legends. In this endeavor, *Mulan* not only rejuvenates an ancient narrative but also presents a transformative perspective on empowerment for modern viewers.

2. Review of Literature

The academic discourse surrounding Disney's *Mulan* (1998) spans various disciplines, particularly gender studies, cultural studies, film theory, and mythology. Scholars have critically examined how the film navigates traditional and contemporary conceptions of heroism, gender identity, and cross-cultural representation. This review of literature provides an overview of key contributions in these areas, while also identifying the gap that this study seeks to address—namely, the limited integration of *Mulan* within the broader framework of mythic narrative, particularly Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*. One of the most frequently explored themes in *Mulan* is its negotiation of gender roles. Helford (2000) argues that *Mulan* subverts the traditional Disney princess formula by centering a female character who seeks self-actualization rather than romantic fulfillment. The film disrupts heteronormative expectations by allowing *Mulan* to define her identity outside of patriarchal structures. This

perspective aligns with Davis (2006), who highlights how *Mulan* presents an alternative model of femininity—one that emphasizes courage, autonomy, and moral clarity over physical appearance or obedience. Furthering this feminist analysis, Li (2020) explores how *Mulan* challenges the “warrior hero” archetype. Traditionally associated with masculinity and physical strength, the warrior hero trope is reimaged through *Mulan*’s intellectual strategy, emotional depth, and ethical leadership. Li contends that the film does not simply insert a woman into a man’s narrative role, but redefines the essence of heroism itself by shifting the focus from domination to compassion and community. From a cultural perspective, Dong (2006) examines *Mulan* as a product of cross-cultural storytelling. While based on the ancient Chinese legend of Hua Mulan, the film adapts the narrative to appeal to a global (and predominantly Western) audience. Dong notes the tension between cultural authenticity and commercial universality, pointing out that while the film honors Chinese motifs and values, it is filtered through an American lens that inevitably shapes its ideological message. This insight is echoed by postcolonial scholars who critique Disney’s tendency to appropriate non-Western stories while repackaging them to fit Western ideals of individuality and progress.

In addition to these feminist and postcolonial readings, there is an emerging body of scholarship that situates *Mulan* within the context of mythological storytelling. Pearson and Pope (1981) and Frankel (2017) critique Joseph Campbell’s *Hero’s Journey* for its androcentric bias, noting its lack of space for female and culturally diverse heroes. While Campbell’s model outlines a universal narrative structure—consisting of stages such as the call to adventure, trials, and return—many scholars argue that this framework often marginalizes or oversimplifies the experiences of women and non-Western characters. Despite these critiques, Campbell’s model remains a valuable tool for analyzing narrative structure. This study builds upon this by applying the monomyth to *Mulan*, not to validate the universality of Campbell’s theory, but to explore how *Mulan* both conforms to and resists it. While the film follows recognizable stages of the *Hero’s Journey*, it does so through a lens of gender nonconformity and cultural hybridity. The protagonist’s journey becomes as much about self-acceptance and identity as it is about external conquest. Although prior research has addressed *Mulan*’s gender politics and cultural positioning, there is limited scholarship that synthesizes these discussions within the mythological framework of heroism. By examining *Mulan* as a mythopoetic text, this study seeks to fill this gap—repositioning the film not just as a feminist retelling, but as a transformative narrative that redefines what it means to be a hero in a modern, globalized world.

3. Metode

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to explore how Disney's *Mulan* (1998) redefines heroism and challenges traditional gender norms through its narrative structure and thematic elements. The qualitative method is appropriate for this type of research because it allows for a deep, interpretative examination of textual and visual materials, emphasizing meaning, symbolism, and cultural context. Rather than focusing on numerical data or statistical interpretation, qualitative analysis prioritizes the richness of the text and the complexity of its messages, making it especially relevant for analyzing film as a cultural artifact. The primary source of data is the film *Mulan* itself, specifically its storyline, character development, dialogues, scenes, and symbolic imagery. Each narrative component is treated as a textual unit that can be decoded and examined for deeper thematic meanings related to heroism, gender, identity, and cultural transformation. The analysis was conducted in three key stages. First, the film's narrative structure was examined using Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey (monomyth) as a foundational framework. This involved mapping *Mulan*'s story arc—such as her call to adventure, trials and challenges, transformation, and return—onto the stages of Campbell's model. This helped identify how the film both adheres to and diverges from the classical structure of heroic storytelling.

Second, the film was coded and categorized based on thematic concerns, particularly those involving gender identity, self-discovery, cultural expectations, and acts of resistance. This stage of analysis focused on how *Mulan*'s character development challenges patriarchal values and offers an alternative vision of heroism based on resilience, intellect, and authenticity rather than physical dominance or traditional masculinity. Third, the findings were interpreted through the lens of feminist literary theory and postcolonial criticism, drawing on secondary scholarship by Helford (2000), Davis (2006), Dong (2006), and Li (2020). These works provided theoretical grounding to frame the discussion within larger academic conversations about gender politics, cultural hybridity, and the representation of non-Western mythologies in Western media. The selection of *Mulan* as a case study is purposeful, given its widespread cultural impact and its unique positioning at the intersection of Eastern legend and Western animation. As a modern adaptation of the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan, the film serves as a rich text for analyzing how contemporary media can repurpose ancient myths to express progressive ideals and challenge normative values.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Result

The analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) reveals several key findings regarding the film's redefinition of heroism and its subversion of traditional gender norms. This section will

discuss deeper into these findings, exploring how they contribute to a broader understanding of gender identity, cultural representation, and the evolution of heroic narratives.

4.2 Subversion of Traditional Heroism

One of the most significant results of this study is the way Mulan subverts traditional notions of heroism. In classical narratives, heroism is often associated with physical strength, martial prowess, and the ability to conquer adversaries. Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework, which has been widely used to analyze heroic narratives, typically emphasizes these traits. However, Mulan diverges from this model by presenting a protagonist whose heroism is rooted in qualities that are often overlooked in traditional storytelling.

Mulan's journey begins with her call to adventure, which is not motivated by a desire for glory or conquest but rather by a deep sense of duty to her family. When her elderly father is called to serve in the army, Mulan's decision to disguise herself as a male warrior is driven by love and sacrifice rather than a quest for personal glory. This foundational motivation sets the stage for a redefinition of heroism that prioritizes emotional depth and ethical considerations over mere physical dominance.

Throughout the film, Mulan faces numerous challenges that test her resilience and ingenuity. Unlike traditional heroes who rely on brute strength, Mulan uses her intelligence and resourcefulness to navigate the trials she encounters. For instance, during training, she employs creative strategies to overcome her male counterparts, demonstrating that heroism can manifest through cleverness and adaptability. This portrayal challenges the conventional narrative that equates heroism with physical prowess, suggesting instead that true greatness lies in the ability to think critically and act ethically in the face of adversity.

Moreover, Mulan's ultimate act of heroism—revealing her true identity to save China from the Huns—further emphasizes the film's subversion of traditional heroism. Rather than achieving victory through violence or domination, Mulan's success is rooted in her authenticity and willingness to embrace her true self. This redefinition of heroism as self-acceptance and collective leadership rather than conquest aligns with contemporary feminist rhetoric, which seeks to expand the definition of heroism to include diverse experiences and perspectives.

4.3 Gender Identity and Empowerment

The film's exploration of gender identity is another critical finding of this study. Mulan presents a nuanced portrayal of femininity that challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. In a cultural context where women are often relegated to passive roles, Mulan emerges as a dynamic character who actively shapes her destiny. Her journey of self-discovery is marked by a rejection of the constraints imposed by patriarchal society, allowing her to redefine what it means to be a woman and a hero.

Mulan's character embodies a model of empowerment that prioritizes self-actualization over romantic fulfillment. Unlike many traditional Disney princess narratives that center around love and marriage, Mulan emphasizes the importance of personal growth and autonomy. Mulan's initial struggle to conform to societal expectations—exemplified by her attempts to fit into the role of a dutiful daughter—highlights the tension between individual desires and cultural norms. However, as she embraces her identity as a warrior, she challenges these norms and asserts her agency.

The film's portrayal of Mulan's transformation is particularly significant in the context of feminist discourse. Scholars such as Helford (2000) and Davis (2006) have noted that *Mulan* subverts the traditional Disney princess formula by centering a female character who seeks self-actualization rather than romantic fulfillment. Mulan's journey is not defined by her relationships with men but rather by her internal struggles and triumphs. This shift in focus allows the film to present a more complex and empowering vision of femininity, one that emphasizes courage, autonomy, and moral clarity.

Furthermore, Mulan's defiance of gender norms is exemplified in her decision to disguise herself as a male warrior. This act of gender transgression serves as a powerful critique of the rigid binaries that often define gender identity. By taking on a male persona, Mulan challenges the notion that heroism is inherently masculine and demonstrates that courage and strength can be embodied by individuals of any gender. This subversion of gender norms not only empowers Mulan but also invites viewers to reconsider their own perceptions of gender and heroism.

4.4 Cultural Hybridity

Another key finding of this study is the film's engagement with cultural hybridity. Mulan operates at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultural narratives, drawing from the ancient Chinese legend of Hua Mulan while also appealing to a global audience, particularly Western viewers. This cultural negotiation raises important questions about authenticity, representation, and the implications of adapting non-Western stories for Western consumption.

While Mulan honors its Chinese roots by incorporating elements of Chinese culture, such as music, aesthetics, and values, it also reflects Western ideals of individuality and empowerment. This duality is evident in the film's narrative structure, which follows the familiar arc of a hero's journey while infusing it with themes that resonate with contemporary audiences. The film's ability to balance cultural authenticity with commercial appeal highlights the complexities of cross-cultural storytelling and the challenges of representing non-Western narratives in a way that is both respectful and engaging.

Critics have pointed out that Disney's adaptations often risk oversimplifying or commodifying the cultures they draw from, leading to a tension between cultural authenticity

and the need to appeal to a global market. Dong (2006) notes that while *Mulan* incorporates traditional Chinese motifs, it is ultimately filtered through an American lens, which shapes its ideological message. This raises important questions about the implications of such adaptations for representation and authenticity, particularly in a globalized world where cultural narratives are increasingly intertwined.

Despite these challenges, *Mulan* serves as a powerful example of how contemporary media can repurpose ancient myths to express progressive ideals. The film's engagement with cultural hybridity allows it to resonate with diverse audiences while also challenging normative values. By presenting a protagonist who embodies both Eastern and Western ideals, *Mulan* invites viewers to reconsider the boundaries of cultural identity and the possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue.

4.5 Mythopoetic Resistance

The concept of mythopoetic resistance emerges as a significant theme in the analysis of *Mulan*. The film can be seen as a radical act of reinterpreting traditional narratives to embody progressive ideas about heroism, gender, and cultural identity. *Mulan*'s journey is not merely about personal triumph; it also emphasizes the importance of collective leadership and community, challenging the notion that heroism is solely an individual pursuit.

Mulan's ultimate act of defiance—revealing her true identity to save her country—serves as a powerful statement about the nature of heroism. Rather than achieving victory through violence or domination, *Mulan*'s success is rooted in her authenticity and willingness to embrace her true self. This redefinition of heroism as self-acceptance and collective action aligns with contemporary feminist and postcolonial critiques that seek to expand the definition of heroism to include diverse experiences and perspectives.

The film's narrative structure, which follows the stages of Campbell's Hero's Journey while simultaneously subverting them, exemplifies this mythopoetic resistance. *Mulan*'s journey becomes a transformative narrative that challenges traditional heroic archetypes and redefines what it means to be a hero in a modern, globalized context. By emphasizing emotional depth, ethical leadership, and the courage to defy societal norms, *Mulan* presents a compelling model for understanding heroism that transcends gender and cultural limitations.

4.6 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on gender, heroism, and cultural representation in media. By situating *Mulan* within the framework of mythological storytelling, the analysis highlights the film's role in transforming traditional narratives to reflect modern values.

4.7 Reimagining Heroism

The study underscores the importance of redefining heroism in ways that are inclusive and reflective of diverse experiences. Mulan's character challenges the conventional warrior archetype, suggesting that true heroism encompasses emotional depth, ethical leadership, and the courage to defy societal norms. This reimagining aligns with feminist critiques of traditional narratives that often marginalize female voices.

The film's portrayal of Mulan as a hero who embodies resilience, intellect, and moral integrity serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant representations of heroism in popular culture. By centering a female protagonist who defies cultural expectations, Mulan not only redefines heroism but also challenges viewers to reconsider their own perceptions of what it means to be a hero.

4.8 Cultural Context and Adaptation

The film's adaptation of the Hua Mulan legend illustrates the complexities of crosscultural storytelling. While Mulan honors its Chinese roots, it also reflects Western ideals of individuality and empowerment. This duality invites critical reflection on how cultural narratives are reshaped for different audiences and the implications of such adaptations for representation and authenticity.

The negotiation between cultural authenticity and commercial appeal raises important questions about the responsibilities of filmmakers in representing nonWestern stories. As global audiences become increasingly diverse, the need for authentic and respectful representations of cultural narratives becomes paramount. Mulan serves as a case study in how contemporary adaptations can navigate these complexities while promoting progressive ideas about gender and identity.

5. Conclusion

For this research, Disney's animated film *Mulan* (1998) is critically examined as a deep cultural phenomenon that deconstructs traditional concepts of heroism and subverts hegemonic gender expectations. Adapted from the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan, the film is analyzed using qualitative textual criticism and Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework. Key breakthroughs illustrate that Mulan constructively subverts conventional conceptualizations of heroism commonly linked to physical prowess and masculine martial abilities. Instead, the movie focuses on inner strength, cleverness, and moral integrity as the true pillars of a hero. Mulan's journey, promoted by family sacrifices and resistance to confining gender roles, displays a different type of courage as an accomplishment derived from creativity and moral strength.

Furthermore, this research examines how Mulan re-interprets the ancient Hua Mulan legend in modern terms as a heroine of female empowerment. Not only does this Disney re-

interpretation place the female characters into heroic positions but also redefines heroism itself in non-gender and non-cultural terms. The film is considered a mythopoetic act of defiance, with an expansive heroism that is centered on self-acceptance and shared leadership instead of conquest. In this manner, Mulan not only renews old stories but also provides a radical perspective that is relevant to contemporary audiences, calling them to rethink the definition of heroism in terms beyond narrow gender constructs.

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