

## 1 / Prologue

The legend of Mulan—the maiden who performed heroic deeds in battle while dressed as a male soldier—appeared in China some time between the fourth and the sixth centuries and now is well known in North America.<sup>1</sup> This study investigates variations of Mulan’s story that feature a cross-dressed character. Certain elements of the story are consistent in its many retellings: a young woman takes the place of her elderly father in war, serves her country valiantly in disguise as a man, and returns home with triumph and honor to resume her womanly life. Mulan’s tale, despite its journey across time, geography, and cultures, continues to be about a young woman’s successful transgression.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the story, however, varies in relation to the historical and cultural context in which it is retold and through which its plot and moral import are reshaped.

Beginning as a probably non-Han Chinese folk ballad, Mulan’s tale became a part of classic Chinese literature; in the twentieth century the story appeared in Chinese American writing, children’s picture books, and even animated films in the United States. This book traces the development of Mulan’s image from a Chinese folk heroine in legend to an illustrious icon in local history and literary tradition, to a Chinese American woman warrior, to a range of characters with differing personalities and storylines in children’s books, and then to an animated Disney heroine in the global marketplace. In tracing the continuities and discontinuities of Mulan’s story, this project poses two main questions: what does the story’s evolution reveal about womanhood, heroism,

filial piety, and loyalty in premodern China? And what does it reveal about female agency, ethnic identity, and cultural hybridity in Chinese America? The exploration of Mulan's cross-cultural journey ranges from the Northern Dynasties (386–581) until the beginning of the twenty-first century; it considers literary texts in classic Chinese, Mandarin, and English, as well as children's picture books and animated feature films.

The earliest written account of Mulan is commonly acknowledged to be an anonymous folk ballad, entitled "Mulan shi" ("Ballad of Mulan," hereafter "Ballad"). Believed to have been composed during the Northern Dynasties, the tale was collected in an anthology of lyrics, folk songs, and poems titled *Yuefu shiji* (Collection of Yuefu Poems) in the thirteenth century. The three-hundred-odd-word "Ballad" is a narrative poem that portrays Mulan as a courageous daughter. To stand in for her elderly father who has been conscripted by the imperial court, she impersonates a man and fights in the armed forces. After years on the battlefield, Mulan turns down a promotion in the official ranks along with the benefits bestowed on her by the emperor so that she can return home and resume her womanly life. After reuniting with her family and changing back into her feminine dress, she presents herself to her male companions. Her soldier friends are astonished by the fact that Mulan's secret had never been revealed during their many years of service life. They hasten to show their respect and applaud her for her courage and accomplishments. The "Ballad" neither explains Mulan's family background or her military performance, nor does it specify her personal life before departure and after homecoming. As a result, readers and writers enjoy great opportunity to fill in details from their imaginations. Since the formation of the "Ballad," Mulan's story has been adapted, retold, and alluded to in Chinese poetry, prose, drama, stage performance, and folklore. Her tale also has found its way into local histories.

This book argues that, instead of being considered a model character at the first dissemination of her story, Mulan has evolved into an ideal heroine during a lengthy process of storytelling and retelling. The ethical and moral values that her image embodies reflect a collection of the virtues found in a typology of heroines in premodern Chinese culture. The sketchy portrayal in the "Ballad" enables varied interpretations of the ethics implied by the character and her unconventional behavior. One conceptualization takes Mulan as the exemplification of the martial tradition applied to both men and women in the northern literature in premodern China (Hu Shi; Wang Zhong 147–49; Chen Youbing 47–48). Another interpretation underscores the Confucian idea of filial piety to

justify her unusual actions (Zhang Rufa). In yet another view, Mulan's story reveals that a female protagonist can be cherished for her talents beyond the domestic sphere (Wang Rubi; Zhang Jing 47). All these readings between the lines have contributed to the character's iconic image; her name has become synonymous with "heroine" in Mandarin, and her story is known in almost every household in China.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century the character Mulan has become familiar to a broad range of English-speaking audiences, owing to three major sources: Maxine Hong Kingston's acclaimed book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976); a number of picture books for children published since the 1990s in the United States; and Disney Studio's animated films, *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan II* (2005), together with the commercial products and promotional bundles that accompanied them. Kingston's book reconfigures Mulan as an idealized heroine in a girl's fantasy and transplants her tale into the context of Chinese America. First published as a memoir, her controversial work contains retellings of the folk character Mulan (Fa Mu Lan in Kingston's spelling) and the historical poet Cai Yan (ca. 177–ca. 239; Ts'ai Yen in Kingston's spelling) in its recounting of how the narrator constructs her female ethnic identity as she comes of age. Giving Mulan's tale an autobiographical spin, Kingston writes her work in the style of "talking-stories."<sup>3</sup> Instead of literally translating the Chinese legend of Mulan, Kingston transforms the folk heroine into a Chinese American woman warrior and avenger whose image is enriched through a bicultural legacy and a conscious search for female empowerment.

Mulan probably was introduced to English-speaking readers when the folk "Ballad" was translated in the nineteenth century. In terms of literary renditions of Mulan in English, the stage play *China Marches On* (1938), written by Chinese American actor and playwright, H. T. Tsiang, alluded to this character and predated Kingston's book and Disney Company's films by decades. Moreover, in 1996 William Wu published a short story, "The Ginseng Potion," in which he imagines Mulan's adventure in a military expedition from 398 to 410. Compared to the Kingston and Disney Company's versions, particularly significant in the developing course of Mulan's story as well as for their historical and cultural influences, the more obscure literary renditions such as Tsiang's and Wu's nonetheless add to the multiple layers of Mulan's lore.

Mulan also has emerged as a favorite subject for writers and illustrators of children's literature in the United States. Since the 1990s, a number of picture books have adapted her story with various narrative strategies

and artistic styles. These visual materials enrich the Mulan gallery not only by retelling her story, but also by portraying the heroine in feminine dress as well as in masculine armor. Primarily targeting young readers and their parents, they collectively help expand Mulan's fame and influence in a cross-cultural setting. Except for the dissatisfactory reception in the film market in mainland China, the 1998 feature film *Mulan* has achieved such box office success that Disney Company decided to release a sequel, *Mulan II*. These films, together with the picture books, art books, toys, games, as well as the Oriental McRib from McDonald's and other commercial venues, have boosted the character's popularity in the United States and increased her international fame. In North America, the film *Mulan* has provoked differing reactions among film critics and scholars from various fields. Although promoted for its authentic cultural specifics, the film is nonetheless a product of transculturation; embracing a number of profeminist elements in portraying a strong female lead character, the film ultimately represents a false feminist mentality. Whether the film incurs positive or negative responses, the cultural influence of the Disneyfied Mulan is worth exploring.<sup>4</sup>

All these sources contribute significantly to Mulan's expanded popularity, particularly in North America, as well as to her development into an iconic heroine for readers and viewers worldwide. The majority of the English-speaking audience is fascinated by the narratives and visual portrayals of this extraordinary character, but many readers are unaware of the alterations that Mulan's tale has undergone as a result of this multitude of storytelling and retelling. Seldom do these viewers realize the richness and variety of Mulan's story in China before the heroine's journey across the Pacific Ocean. In her earliest incarnation as the leading character of a favorite Chinese folk story, Mulan is neither guided and trained by a magic power to combat social injustice (as is Kingston's character) nor driven by her independent spirit (as is Disney's protagonist). Nor do viewers know that these varied alterations of her tale have targeted audience groups in such diverse social and cultural contexts as the coming-of-age of Asian American identity in the 1970s that informed Kingston's book, the climate to promote bilingual and multicultural education that fostered the publication of the picture books, and the strategy and effort to expand its Asian market that motivated, at least in part, the Disney Studio's production.

Much scholarly attention in North America has been focused on what has happened to Mulan's story after it reached the western hemisphere. But one may ask whether her story was a unified entity before it embarked

on its journey to the West. What is Mulan's "authentic" Chinese heritage when it comes to literary texts? When the American versions interpret and reimagine the heroine's tale, on what resources do they rely for the "original" story? What has brought about the differential reception to the reconfiguration presented by a Chinese American writer compared to the image after Disneyfication? These questions, all related to the issue of cultural authenticity and the retelling of Mulan's story, need to be examined through tracing this character's literary voyage across historical and geographical borders.

The retellings of Mulan's story in the United States provide the reader with reinventions of this character imbued with new critical agendas. At the same time, these versions all allude, directly or indirectly, to her Chinese heritage. Indeed, some Asian American scholars have noted the multiple layers of Mulan's legend in Chinese culture (Wong, "Kingston's Handling"; Lai; Lan). Nevertheless, no comprehensive study clarifies the evolution of her tale in China and America. In response, this book discusses the narratives and images of Mulan over a long time span and traces the process through which the representation of a model heroine has been built up in her journey from premodern China to contemporary United States. In analyzing an individual character as extraordinary as Mulan, it is important not to remove her evolving image from its cultural environments. In contextualizing Mulan with other Chinese heroines, this study hopes to demonstrate the route on which Mulan develops from a courageous legendary figure to an illustrious historical heroine who embodies a collection of virtues found in heroic women. Through analyzing the variations of Mulan's tale in Chinese culture and highlighting the usually ignored diversity within the "original," this book uncovers the complexities underlying the current discussions on cultural authenticity in Asian American literary studies. By looking at Mulan as a figure claimed by various regions and recorded in their local histories in China, the discussion presented herein deconstructs the monolithic "China" in Chinese America and by extension the "Asia" in Asian America.

In scrutinizing variations of Mulan's story, this study conceptualizes the transmission and transformation of this maiden in the trope of a palimpsest. The term "palimpsest" captures the interplay of continuity and erasure in the evolving process of Mulan's tale. A palimpsest means "a thing likened to such a writing surface, especially in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record" ("Palimpsest"). Frequently, the trace of the original text can be

seen beneath the later writing, showing the process of erasure (that is, the later writing replacing the earlier words) as well as continuity (that is, the new text building on the old). During the long course of evolution, Mulan's story has been written and rewritten into multiple layers that efface and erase the previous versions. The process of preservation and alteration of Mulan's story suggests a layering of literary and visual representations that maintain connections through the cross-cultural journey of Mulan.

Such a transforming process of Mulan's story demonstrates how "literary discourse" and "other discourses" (to use Gérard Genette's words) often find paths into each other. Palimpsest conveys the multiplicity of different versions portraying Mulan in a variety of guises: for example, the ideal embodiment of filial piety, a reflection of young women's awareness and enactment of female agency, and an example of a personal struggle for individuality. This concept also exemplifies Mulan's cross-dressing and re-dressing that have been consistently portrayed in the evolution of her legend. Even the Disney version concludes Mulan's story with the heroine's homecoming and return to womanly life. The resultant transformations therefore share the common standpoints of temporality of cross-dressing as well as reinstallation of femininity in interpretations from historical and cultural circumstances.

One key concept that appears frequently in this book—representation—reflects my priorities in structuring an analytic study of Mulan. The multivalence of the term necessitates clarification of my usage. I use "representation" particularly as it has been shaped by postcolonial and feminist theories to refer to the different versions of Mulan's story that inherit the element of the cross-dressed heroine amidst the combat zone and at the same time reimagine the character and her deeds. During this process, her tale has been built up into a colorful collage of varied aspects that depends on who is telling the story, to whom, and in what context. In "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," Homi Bhabha observes that the process of stereotyping is "not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference . . . constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in signification of psychic and social relations" (75). Building on Bhabha's observation, I conceptualize the representation of Mulan within a space contested in terms of ethnicity, gender, and power relations. In this light, the varied faces of Mulan, as they have been created in China and the United States, cannot be judged

simply as positive or negative, antistereotypical or stereotypical, or in Frank Chin's words, "real" or "fake." Rather, these representations are dynamic and "mobilized" depending on discursive context (Feng 9).

In terms of combining womanhood and heroism, Mulan's heritage has been and will continue to be contested through feminist readings. Judith Butler argues that representation, like politics, is controversial: "*representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects"; moreover, "representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1). This book emphasizes the negotiation between gender and warrior values as it is reflected in the stories of heroic women among whom Mulan stands out as a model. It also explores how a heroine's boundary-crossing behavior challenges and at the same time is regulated by certain circumstances and for specific purposes to conform to the social norms regarding women and how such balancing compensates for the violation of her gender role, which makes the heroine nonthreatening and hence acceptable and praiseworthy.

To discuss Mulan as a paradigm out of a group image of heroines, chapter 2 starts by identifying a female heroic lineage in premodern China. The moral values and attributes associated with these characters provide a favorable environment for cultivating Mulan as an ideal model. Chapter 3 traces Mulan's "travel" in premodern China, which consists of increased life details and articulated ethical principles. These modifications show an attempt to historicize and localize this heroine. This chapter also analyzes various texts concerning Mulan's biographical information. By dating each source, claim, and assertion as well as sorting all the materials in a chronological sequence, this chapter reveals how different regions have claimed Mulan to be their own folk heroine and how she had become a multifaceted heroine in literature and local history by the nineteenth century. It shows that before an American audience embraced Mulan as a cultural import from China, her story had already experienced a long process of alteration. In this sense, her journey to the West is an extension that adds more layers onto this cross-cultural palimpsest. Chapter 4 discusses Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its critical engagement. In Mulan's cross-cultural transformation, Kingston's book attaches new plots and messages to the folk story and establishes a bridge between two cultures that leads to the heroine's popularity in America. In recreating Mulan's lore in a first-person narrative,

Kingston places particular emphasis on female empowerment: Mulan's years of training as preparation for her becoming a military leader, the communal and familial responsibility reinforced by the carved words on her back, and the ultimate accomplishment of a superior model who fulfills both male and female roles in her society. Reading the textual and graphic presentations for a young audience, chapter 5 examines picture books of Mulan on two levels: first, how these works claim cultural roots and aim at introducing Chinese tradition to readers outside China; and second, how the collaboration of written texts and colored illustrations underscore such agendas as female empowerment and cross-dressing, through Judith Butler's theoretical lens of "performative gender." Chapter 6 examines Disney's animated films *Mulan* and *Mulan II*, other animated productions adapting Mulan's story, and Mulan's global fame. Through these and other modifications, Mulan's story and image have evolved for hundreds of years and across cultural boundaries. During the course of erasure, addition, and revision her palimpsestic story serves as a cultural vehicle that carries portable traditions across time and space.

As a result of the Chinese translation of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* along with the release of Disney Studio's *Mulan* and the publication of picture books adapting the Disneyfied character in China, Mulan has undergone a counter migration back to her cultural homeland.<sup>5</sup> The critical responses that Kingston's work has kindled among Chinese scholars and readers, together with the academic and popular reception of Disney Company's animation, further complicate the question of cultural authenticity in the evolving route of Mulan's tale. A live-action feature film, *Hua Mulan*, released in China in November 2009 and adaptations of Mulan's lore in other performing art forms attest to the heroine's flourishing in the global era ("Tribute" 7) and strong continuation of Mulan's charm.