

POPULAR CULTURE AND PUBLIC IMAGINARY: DISNEY VS. CHINESE STORIES OF MULAN

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Abstract

This case study is an attempt to challenge the dominant narrative of a U.S. popular cultural text that has shaped the public imaginary of a non-Western culture and to open up the possibility of re-constructing alternative narratives, imaginaries, cultural spaces, and identities. More specifically, the present analysis investigates the process that Disney appropriated the Chinese legend of *Mulan* into a “universal” classic and offers an interpretation of *The Ballad of Mulan*, upon which the Disney film was based, as a form of counter-rhetoric for negotiating the dominant image produced by Disney. This case study demonstrates that Disney’s appropriation simultaneously reinforced the existing racial and gender ideologies through deprecating Chinese culture as an Oriental despotism and dissolving feminism into the cultural/racial hierarchy. Contrary to the overriding theme of individualism in the Disney version, the original *Ballad* reflects the Chinese ethos of relationalism, filial piety, and loyalty and embraces an alternative form of feminism that is predicated on the Chinese preference for the collective.

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Introduction

Critical scholars have long recognised the immense power of popular culture in shaping public opinions and imaginaries in modern societies. Popular culture, with its ubiquity, functions as one of the most powerful and pervasive storytellers that provide symbolic sources for people to perceive and interpret social affairs and relationships. Popular culture also plays a crucial role in the formation of our cultural identities and our perceptions of other cultures and groups.

As the process of globalisation has brought once disparate peoples into close contact with each other, Western, particularly U.S. American, popular culture, continues to dominate the international market. The global expansion of the U.S. culture industry has substantially reshaped public imaginary around the world and left an indelible imprint on social life in the global community. In the international context, the real power of U.S. popular culture is that it asserts the authority to alter or even obliterate collective memories of non-Western cultures and to re-define them in its own terms. As a result, peoples of non-Western cultures were dismembered from their own memory and instilled in the memory of the West.

The present study focuses on Disney's feature film *Mulan* as a case of the U.S. culture industry's appropriation of non-Western cultural materials (i.e., the Chinese *Ballad of Mulan*) that (re)shapes the imagery of non-Western cultures (Chinese culture) in the mind of world audiences. The study explores how the story of *Mulan* was abstracted from its Chinese cultural context and then injected into a Western frame. In this process, Chinese cultural values were selectively disposed and replaced with Western ideologies that simultaneously pacify feminist criticism and reinforce the racial/cultural hierarchy.

The rationale to choose the film of *Mulan* for analysis is three-fold. First, this film is internationally acclaimed and influential as a result of Disney's successful marketing effort. The film was ranked 12th in terms of U.S. domestic box office in 1998 (120.6 million dollars), and also grossed 176.5 million dollars overseas. Although the film was released in 1998, it has become one of the Disney classics. The character of Mulan was marketed as one of the Disney princesses, along with Snow White, Cinderella, Princess Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, and Pocahontas, even though Mulan has no royal lineage. Moreover, Mulan has been received more positively by critics and audiences, especially female audiences, than other Disney princesses. A critic comments that "*Mulan* is one of the rare G-rated films that provide positive role models for girls" (Toppo 2006, 8D). The popularity of this film confers its authority to tell the story of *Mulan* globally.

Secondly, this film's depiction of a strong and independent girl represents a new kind of treatment of feminism in popular culture. From time to time, I have heard U.S. female college students make remarks on the progressive outlook of *Mulan* – she is independent and heroic. One student claims that Mulan is awesome because she made it on her own and that she did not rely on the help of a fairy godmother (such as in the case of Cinderella). This is precisely the point that is missing from other Disney princesses. Indeed, Disney's *Mulan* is lauded by critics and audience members as a rupture of stereotypical female images in U.S. popular culture and endorsement for feminist values. Chan (2002) acclaims *Mulan* as an example of the "empowering" or "liberating" aspect of Hollywood production.

Finally, the Disney film *Mulan* has profound impact on the Western audience's perception of the figure of Mulan and Chinese culture (Djao 2002). Western audiences often consciously or unconsciously assume Disney's portrayal of Chinese culture to be truthful and authentic. This kind of uncritical acceptance can be seen in many of audiences' reviews of this film at amazon.com. Some Western audience members proclaim that this film is a "historically accurate legend." Others found their confirmation in the film's involvement of Chinese-American or Asian-American talents. For example, Ming-Na Wen (aka Ming-Na) plays Mulan and Bradley Darryl Wong (B. D. Wong) provided the voice for Captain Li Shang. The producers' testimony that they spent two weeks in China in order to study Chinese culture, architecture, and natural landscapes, was also taken as an indicator of the authenticity of the film. A young audience member believes that this movie is "good for little kids because it gives a realistic portrayal of the role of women in ancient China" (A Disney Classic 2006).

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I will offer a review of literature on popular culture texts in Critical Cultural Studies. I will then examine the appropriation process through which Disney subjected the Chinese legend of *Mulan* to the Western Orientalist lens and co-opted feminism into dominant racial and gender ideologies. The present study finally presents an interpretation of the original Chinese version of *The Ballad of Mulan*, upon which the Disney film was based, as a possible way of resisting the dominant image produced by Disney and enabling the marginalised to negotiate and assert their cultural identities in the face of globalisation. I submit that engaging popular cultural texts as political texts should go beyond merely deconstructing the texts in order to reconstruct the possibilities for new narratives, identities, and cultural spaces. Asante (1992) argues that breaking away from the "mono-cultural reality" produced by the dominant Western culture requires "multicultural literacy," i.e., approaching the text with the due attention to the original collective memory of the oppressed and marginalised as an equally, if not more, important point of view.

Theory of Articulation and Popular Culture Texts

In this session, before I present a detailed analysis of the Disney film *Mulan*, I will ruminate on the theory of articulation that sheds light on the discursive mechanism of popular culture texts that imposes dominant form of meanings on objects and peoples and on the possibility for challenging and resisting dominant meanings through critical engagement with those popular cultural texts.

Many communication researchers agree that the mass media are the most powerful storytellers in modern society. Indeed, the original motivation for communication study in the United States was the fear of mischievous effects of the media. The media have become an important source of information and interpretation, especially for what could not be obtained through first-hand experiences. Western films, as a form of popular culture, are often viewed by both Western and non-Western audience members as realistic or ethnographical information about non-Western cultures (Shohat 1991). A very useful way to tackle the discursive power of a movie is to examine it as socially, politically, culturally, and historically situated text.

Examining textual power from this perspective, Althusser (1971) argues that rather than merely reflecting the social, or producing a system of meaning that supports the existing social order, media texts work as practices that present their own meaning system as real or natural. Thus, the power of the text is not reflecting or confirming, but rather normalising or naturalising, certain practices. Hall contends that the role of film and other forms of mass media is the active production of “consensus” in society. Building on Althusser’s and Laclau’s arguments, Hall (1986, 53) calls this mechanism “articulation.” That is, the media text does not simply distort or misrepresent the reality (consciously or unconsciously). Rather, it works through the process that forms “the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions.” This connection is “a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time.” In other words, articulation is the connection between two distinct discursive elements that would not be connected ordinarily or naturally. It is through articulation that a linkage is established. The discursive unity created by articulation is arbitrary and contingent. Thus, articulation is also a process of intervention of ideology into language. The dominant group that has institutional, material, and discursive resources naturalises its own practices through the control of articulation. The struggle over meaning is essentially the struggle over articulation.

The theory of articulation is not confined to the domain of discourse. It also has implications for social forces. Unlike orthodox Marxists, Hall rejects the necessary correlation between ideology and social class (or social forces). He maintains that ideological elements do not have intrinsic belonging to any political/social position or identity or to any particular social-economic class. Rather, such connection is contingent and non-necessary. One’s social identity (class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.) does not necessarily determine one’s consciousness. It is through articulation that an ideology discovers and speaks to its political subjects. An ideology that enables people to make sense of the world and their own positions can also function to unite those people, political subjects, as a social force or class. In other words, members of social groups are not inherently inscribed with certain ideologies or practices; they need to be articulated into those cultural forms and political/social positions. For example, being a female does not automatically make a woman a feminist. She can be a feminist only if she accepts the articulation of a feminist ideology and uses it to interpret social affairs. By the same token, a man can also subscribe to the feminist ideology even if he does not have a female identity.

Other critical scholars also have recognised that the power of discourse lies in its ability to articulate particular practices and meanings, and to provide inter-textual experience for the audience to consume new discourse. Hay (1989, 135) elucidates that media discourse should be understood as “a site ‘intersected’ by many discourse, where discursive and cultural literacy is actively engaged within concrete, historical situations and where meanings are constructed, negotiated and contested.” The signifying function of the media discourse does not “simply naturalise; it robs the object/signifier of its meaning in a more common, privileged, or accepted context” (Hay 1989, 148). Or put in Hall’s (1986, 48) term, media texts always entail “the imposition of an arbitrary ‘closure’.” As a result, although signs and symbols are polyphonic or multiaccental in nature, the representation process tends to reduce meaning to one direction by suppressing other meanings. Audience

members could restore the polyphony or multiaccentuality in an oppositional reading. They, however, often need to realise the referential and connotative/evaluative dimensions of the “primary” meaning before they can apply a different frame of reference to the discourse.

It is precisely because articulation is not necessary, inherent, or determined that any articulation can be broken down and rearticulated in different ways. This is where the role of human agency comes into play. Rather than being merely the products of dominant discourse, human beings as social actors can intervene in the articulation process. They can resist the dominant discourse through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Therefore, the investigation of the process of how certain meanings and practices are “articulated” or made a coherent unity is not only important for understanding the function of media texts in normalising dominant experiences and identities while marginalising those of the subordinated, but also critical for challenging the dominant discourse and producing possibilities for social change. Giroux (2000a, 494) emphasises that popular cultural texts ought to be approached “not only as objects of struggle in challenging dominant modes of racial and colonial authority but also as pedagogical resources to rewrite the possibilities for new narratives, identities, and cultural spaces.” His contention that media texts should be treated as public pedagogical resources involves more than deconstruction, it further calls for a process of re-construction or re-articulation.

The film *Mulan* has previously been researched from two perspectives: the political economy tradition and the cultural approach. From the political economic point of view, scholars and critics noted that the powerful girl image was actually a product of the profit-driven practice in the media industry (Sweeney 2006). *Mulan* represents the U.S. media industry’s new strategy for cashing in on the growing female market (Nguyen 1998). In order to maximise profits and minimise costs, “ethnic” materials like *Mulan* were transformed into a product for diversified purposes: multi-product lines with ancillary products, merchandising and licensing (Ono and Buescher 2001). The multi-product line functions as a cross-promoting mechanism that convinces people of their need to watch the film. Nguyen (1998) maintained that despite the celebration of the independent girl in the film, subsidiary products, such as dolls with the Deluxe Dress-up Set or the Palace Play Set, strictly confined *Mulan* to the clichéd femininity.

From the cultural perspective, researchers often challenged the distorted representations of Chinese culture in the film. For example, Wang and Yeh (2005, 181) stated that Chinese cultural elements were used to “instrumentally to ensure a façade of otherness.” Ng (2004) indicated that the royal dragon symbol was ridiculed into a frivolous lizard with a name of an ethnic (Chinese) dish, Mushu (mushroom). Sun (2003) and Ng (2004) argued that the “matchmaking forum” was out of character of the Chinese culture. Djao (2002) and Feng (2003) observed that the portrayal of cruel Chinese, particularly Chinese men, subjected *Mulan* to a patriarchal existence fashioned by the West. Ng (2004) insisted that ultimately the film trivialised *Mulan*’s skill and devotion as a warrior. For her, this trivialisation is detrimental to the cultural identity formation of Asian American girls.

Treating this film as merely a product for profit from the political economic perspective or simply inaccurate representations from the cultural tradition fails

to recognise other important factors that are compounding and complicating the case of *Mulan*. Indeed, Disney's endeavour of transforming the Chinese legend into a profitable product is intrinsically intertwined with its effort to fit feminism into the dominant ideological structure. Therefore, this film should be examined as a more complex intersection of gender and culture/race. The present study thus investigates the film of *Mulan* as an intricate and convoluted process in which Disney selected and appropriated gendered non-Western materials to co-opt feminism and to reinforce the existing cultural/racial hierarchy.

Grounded on Hall's theory of articulation, this study explores the connections between specific meanings and practices formed by the media text. My analysis of the Disney's film *Mulan* focuses on the articulation process through which the movie discourse associated Chinese culture and feminism with particular meanings that functions as the primary frame of reference for the audience's interpretations. Furthermore, the present study also strives to demonstrate the possibility for resisting discursive linkages made in the Disney text through offering an example of alternative articulation embodied in the Chinese legend, *The Ballad of Mulan*.

Disney's *Mulan*: Individualism as Universal

Disney proclaims that the adaptation of the Chinese story of *Mulan* is to transform ethnic materials into a "timeless" or "universal" classic (Kurtti 1998). Peter Schneider, Disney Feature Animation President, avers that "the search for who we are, the search for self, it an ever-ongoing process and universal theme" (Kurtti 1998, 189). Guided by this principle, Disney appropriated the *Mulan* story into its typical formula of a hero's journey of self-discovery. The film features *Mulan* as a tomboyish girl who could not fit in the traditional gender role in China. She dressed like a man and went to fight the war against the Huns in her father's place. Only in the military – a men's world traditionally – *Mulan* could "be true to herself" and prove herself. Eventually *Mulan* single-handedly won the war, saved the Chinese kingdom, and lived happily ever after.

The assumed need to transform ethnic materials to "universal" deems only the dominant culture (e.g., Western, white, middle class, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, etc.) universal, while all others lacking of it (Burton-Carvajal 1994). The process of universalisation is essentially a process of projecting the values of the dominant group as the natural or unmarked standard against which alternatives are evaluated and judged (Woo 1994; Yin 2008). Universalisation imposes the perspectives or values of the dominant on the dominated, and does not allow the dominated to use their own perspectives or values. Through the claim of universality, dominated groups are constructed as the abnormal Other, which in turn sustains the myth of the dominant group as the normal Self. Consequently, universalisation works as a mechanism of exclusion that perpetuates the existing hierarchy of discourse and power structure. Wang and Yeh (2005, 180) assert that Disney's *Mulan* is "a familiar version of hybridity through capitalist (Caucasian) co-optation of ethnic material."

Disney's appropriation of non-Western materials, such as *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*, involves abstracting those materials out of their cultural contexts and then subjecting them to a Western frame. In other words, this is the creation or production of non-Western cultures through the lens of the West – the Oriental-

ist practice in Said's (1978) term. At the heart of Orientalism lies the insistence on fundamental difference and inferiority of the non-Western Other in relation to the Western Self (Said 1978). Rather than completely removing all the original cultural elements, Disney's appropriation accentuates the Otherness of non-Western materials so as to cater to the Western audience's desire for exoticism. In the case of *Mulan*, Disney's formulation highlights the different and "authentic" image of China. In order to make Mulan a heroic figure, Chinese culture was denounced and deprecated as an Oriental tyranny. In this sense, the signification of the feminist character was predicated on the representation of China as the cultural Other. Burton-Carvajal (1994) asseverates that Disney's appropriation of non-Western cultural materials indeed displaces and transmutes those materials. For him, the innocent and "genuine" guise carefully orchestrated and maintained by Disney through the use of some "authentic" cultural details barely conceals its underpinning imperialist and patriarchal intentions.

The universal ideal that Disney's *Mulan* accented is the theme of individual freedom. In the movie, it is true that Mulan went to war out of consideration for her aged father. But the real or more primary motivation was about her individuality or self-esteem. When wounded Mulan was deserted in the snow by her peers after they found out her real gender, she reflected on her behaviour and motive.

Mulan: Maybe I should have never left home. Maybe I didn't go for my father. Maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right. [grabs the helmet and looks into it]. So when I looked in the mirror, I'd see someone worthwhile. [tears drop] But I was wrong. I see nothing. [throws the helmet in the snow.]

This self-analytical moment reveals that beneath the apparent love for her father, the unconscious motive of Mulan's going to the war was to redeem her failure at the matchmaker interview, to dispel self-doubt, and to pursuit of a sense of self-hood. Barry Cook, the co-director of the film, confirms the film's individualist tenet in the statement "I think she celebrates the importance of an individual" (Kurtti 1998, 11). This theme has been reiterated throughout the film and is particularly explicated in the lyrics of the song *Reflection*:

*Look at me
I will never pass for a perfect bride
Or a perfect daughter
Can it be
I'm not meant to play this part?
Now I see
That if I were truly to be myself
I would break my family's heart
Who is that girl I see
Staring straight
Back at me?
Why is my reflection someone
I don't know?
Somehow I cannot hide
Who I am
Though I've tried
When will my reflection show*

Who I am inside?
When will my reflection show
Who I am inside?

This song suggests that it was cultural traditions in China that pressed Mulan to wear a mask or to play a role that she felt that she was not meant for. Mulan was torn between the pressure to conform to cultural customs (to be a perfect bride or a perfect daughter) and her own will to be true to her own heart. After repressing her true feelings for a long time, Mulan felt that she was not able to continue to play the ill-fitting part anymore, "somehow I cannot hide who I am though I've tried." At this moment, she took off her exaggerated make-up to see the reflection of her bare (real) face.

The selfhood endorsed by Disney's *Mulan* is an expression of the Western notion of individualism. In the individualistic tradition, an individual's selfhood can be actualised only when there is a consistency between the inner self (one's heart, true feelings) and the outer practice (identity and communicative behaviour). The quest for "the true self" or individuality is thus to liberate oneself from any external forces, such as social roles or other collective identities, that constrain one from achieving such a state. The theme song *Be True to Your Heart* exemplifies the search for the "authentic" self and the desire to dismiss competing claims of different social relations (Woo 1994).

In Disney's transformation of a Chinese story to a "timeless" canon, the Chinese story of *Mulan* was decontextualised, deracinated, and displaced. Chinese cultural elements were stripped away to the extent that only the most superficial ones were strategically retained to ensure a façade of otherness. Stereotypical Chinese icons, such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, giant pandas, dragons, ancestor worship, and martial arts were used as mimicry of Chinese culture. These decorative elements, albeit tremendously superficial, inscribed a sense of authenticity in the film.

This process of appropriation robs *Mulan* of the original meanings – bound by the historical and cultural forces yet multiaccultural (Fowler 1996) – and enciphers it into the system that fits U.S. American middle class ideology (Ono and Buescher 2001). Re-signification or appropriation does not just distort certain authentic meanings. Rather, it contributes to establish, maintain, and reinforce certain ideology – white, middle class, U.S. American ideology in this case – while it challenges, contests, and emasculates others, i.e., Chinese cultural values. In the succeeding pages, I will focus on two types of articulation mechanism through which the movie text established certain discursive connections to commemorate Western ideal of individualism while maintaining cultural/racial hierarchy. The Disney film perpetuates the Orientalist view of the West/non-West relationship through reinforcing the stereotype of China as cultural tyranny and domesticates feminist tenets through subsuming them under the cultural/racial realm.

Chinese Culture as Oriental Despotism

In the Disney film of *Mulan*, traditional Chinese culture was portrayed as an "Oriental despotism" that was hostile to both individual freedom and feminism (Feng 2003, 240). Traditional Chinese culture is depicted in opposition to the free individual, thus also the obstacle to gender equality. Mulan was called a "traitorous

snake" who was "dishonoring the army" by her superior in the army and by the Emperor. In the movie, Mulan would be killed if her real gender were found out. After defeating the Hun troops and saving her peers, Mulan was deserted cruelly in the snow because she was found out to be a woman. These representations encapsulate the dichotomy of gender assertion vs. the Chinese tradition. Thus, as Sun (2003) argues, in order to make Mulan a strong female figure, China was signified as the most sexist culture.

The Disney production team used a matchmaker-interview ritual as the opening of the film. This matchmaker-interview ritual presented an obese, fussy matchmaker as the gatekeeper of traditional femininity. She determined the worth of girls by evaluating their suitability for the role of the virtuous wife and good mother. The matchmaker interview was framed as a deeply rooted cultural institution that exclusively defined the purpose and worth of a girl in traditional Chinese culture and the only means for a female to bring "honour" to her family. In reality, many Chinese critics and audiences (e.g., Ng 2004; Sun 2003) quickly pointed out that the matchmaker-interview ritual did not exist in historical China. In Disney's appropriation, Chinese culture was ridiculed as strictly preventing girls from achieving their non-traditional potentials. Mulan as a tomboyish character was torn between social requirements and her inclination to find her true self. The ritual of a matchmaker interview enunciates traditional Chinese culture as everything that is not universal or modern, everything that Mulan is up against.

The song *Reflection* is a vivid narration of the Chinese cultural tradition's antagonism to Mulan's longing for her true self. In this song, the role imposed on girls by the tradition is an ill-fitting part for Mulan. "Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter. Can it be I'm not meant to play this part?" By defining the social role for women as a "part" that one has to play, Disney's representation reinforces the idea that the claims of social relations, including family, are the source of interference with individual freedom. The song further fortifies the irreconcilable relationship between individual selfhood and the Chinese cultural tradition, "Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart."

In the Disney story, family simultaneously signifies love and obstruction of individual free will. As a symbol of love, family was one of the reasons behind Mulan's decision to join the army. Disney portrayed a close loving relationship between Mulan and her father. When Mulan felt terribly sorry for her unacceptable performance at the matchmaker interview, her father convinced her that she was a late bloomer, "But I'll bet when it blooms, it will be the most beautiful of all." At this end of the movie, when Mulan returned home and brought her father the trophy of the Chanyu's sword and the Emperor crest, her father threw the sword and crests away and declared: "The greatest gift and honour is to having you for a daughter! I've missed you so!" In these scenes, Mulan's father went against the cultural tradition and the family honour and valued her as an individual, who she really was.

Conversely, Mulan's father was also described as a character espousing the oppressive Chinese tradition that restrained Mulan from speaking up as an equal individual. Mulan's father averred that Mulan had dishonoured him by speaking in the presence of men. A loving and understanding father was suddenly turned

into an authoritarian parent. When Mulan's father was drafted into the Imperial Army, he aligned completely with the Chinese tradition.

Mulan [stands up, pours tea for her father. Puts teapot down heavily on the table] You shouldn't have to go!

Mother: Mulan.

Mulan: There are plenty of young men to fight for China!

Father: It is an honour to protect my country and my family.

Mulan: So you will die for honour?

Father: I will die doing what is right. [stands up]

Mulan: But if you . . . [stands up]

Father: I know my place! It's time you learn yours!

In this confrontation, Mulan's father was no longer a reasonable person. His fixation on honour exemplified the irrational feature of the Oriental Other. He also insisted on putting Mulan in her place, the inferior place for women ("I know my place! It's time you learn yours!"). Unlike the scenes discussed previously, Mulan's father intended to restrict Mulan's individuality by pressing her into a socially prescribed role. The dual functions of the character of Mulan's father in the Disney film made him inconsistent and contradictory. The father character simultaneously represented the affirmation of Mulan's individual uniqueness, which was the source of Mulan's affection and the reason for her to go to war, and the repressive force that suffocated the same individuality. The individualist theme of the story that the film invites audience members to identify with was projected as an atypical and frail exception in Chinese culture, in sharp contrast to its whole-hearted embodiment in the West. Chinese culture, thus, was rendered to represent the lack of positive values, the negative cultural Other (Hsu 1983).

The construction of Chinese culture as an Oriental tyranny that was antithetical to individualism and feminism reflected and reinforced the Western presumption that lack of freedom and gender oppression are inherent in non-Western cultures (Ng 2004). The film thus attributed gender oppression to a uniquely Chinese problem. And the solution to those problems alluded to in the film was the demolition of the cultural Other (Majid 1998). By blaming the cultural Other, Disney managed to avoid attending to those problems in U.S. society (Feng 2003).

Feminism as Racial Hierarchy

As part of the culture industry, Disney is inevitably impacted by changes in the larger social and political context in which it operates. As the U.S. society has gradually been accepting some aspects of feminist ideology, Disney could not hold on to the images of traditional women, such as Snow White (Sun 2003). It has to invent more contemporary images with some consciousness of gender equality. Disney's *Mulan* also incorporates some feminist thoughts into the film. However, rather than a genuine endowment of female empowerment (the pseudo-feminism ends with a clichéd romance with her prince charming), Disney co-opts feminism to the mainstream U.S. American culture by transforming it into the perpetuation of individualism and racial hierarchy (Nguyen 1998). This practice is what Barthes (1972) calls "inoculation" – the dominant ideology's ability to prevent radical change by absorbing or incorporating opposing ideologies into the core ideological structure.

In Disney's individualistic formulation, the goal of feminism is for women to assert their identities as autonomous individuals. Mulan, the heroin, is materialised through individual, and often impromptu, actions. Mulan single-handedly won the war against Mongol troops and rescued Captain Li Shang through quick thinking and launching an avalanche on the spot. In the Imperial City, Mulan outwitted her enemies, with the aid of her special unit, the gang of four, and rescued the Emperor and Captain Li Shang, and thus saved the Chinese Kingdom. In so doing, Disney personalises social events by collapsing them into the tales of individual heroes and makes the impossible possible through its typical formula of magic.

Meanwhile, Disney also reduces feminism into a cultural phenomenon. The need to absorb some ideas of gender equality without radically challenging the patriarchal social structure requires Disney to channel feminism in a way that is non-threatening to white male audiences. In the case of *Mulan*, Disney shelters the gender hierarchy in Western society through dissolving it into the racial/cultural hierarchy. That is, it exempts Western cultures from scrutiny through attributing gender injustice to the overall formation of non-Western cultures.

In the Western popular culture, non-Western cultures are often assumed to be the primary source of gender repression. Spivak (1998) contends that the new cultural imperialist agenda is reflected in the "saving brown women from brown men" ideology. Feminism is less threatening and more acceptable to the Western audience if non-Western women are being rescued from, or willing to fight against, their traditional cultures. Disney's *Mulan* subjugates gender oppression through portraying it as a culturally specific problem, that is, a Chinese problem. Mulan is a victim of the Chinese culture, and her struggle is against all Chinese traditions and institutions. Male Chinese characters are either the incarnation of the abusive Chinese culture or too impotent to save her from that culture.

Shohat (1991) observed that in the absence of Whites, non-Western women have been temporarily promoted to the centre in Western films. In the Disney film, Mulan was not temporarily promoted to the centre. She was the centre of the whole film, but the centre was provisional. She was the centre only in relation to other Chinese on the margin. China was the centre only when compared to the animal-like Huns, the ultimate Other. The Huns were wrongly represented as Mongols in the film when they actually were a Turkic people. Disney carefully orchestrated the character of Mulan, so that she not only does not disrupt the racial hierarchy, but also fortifies it. Since the cause of gender suppression resides solely in Chinese culture, the solution is to condemn that culture without disturbing the Western system.

Non-Western women are at the bottom of the racial and gender hierarchy. Tierney (2006) contends that non-white actresses are more sexualised than their white counterparts. Asian women, in particular, are perceived as willing to please, submissive, and sexually accessible by Hollywood, as symbolised by the stereotypes of the *Madam Butterfly* and *China Doll*. Many Asian women are also at the lowest end of the economic spectrum. In some cases, Pilipina mail-order brides for instance, they are literarily sex objects that can be purchased. In the making of the film, Disney toyed with this type of image and attempted to title the movie *China Doll* (Kurtti 1998). But the submissive and oversexualised Asian woman image may pose a threat to some white women who perceive that Asian women are either competing with them for white men or undermining Western feminism.

To avoid the potential threat to certain white women, Disney emasculated Mulan's sexuality. Disney depicted Mulan as cute and tomboyish. Although romance was implied, Mulan was portrayed as a strong and independent woman who won men's respect with her wits and strength. Disney was very careful not to make the strong female character into the overpowering and sexually manipulative dragon lady, another Asian stereotype.

The representation of an extremely sexist environment in China can invoke a sense of superiority in many Western female audiences. To those Western women who view non-Western women as less developed counterparts Mulan's beliefs and actions are mere imitations of Western feminism. Thus, Mulan's position being the centre in the film does not challenge Western females' status in the racial/gender hierarchy.

What needs to be noted is that in Hollywood representations, the non-Western female is promoted to the centre only as a rare exception of a non-Western cultural/racial group. In addition to her physical beauty, her willingness to be civilised and assimilated is mandatory to distinguish her from the rest of her group. The character of Mulan fits right into this category. She whole-heartedly embraces Western values such as individuality, independence, and, to a certain degree, feminism. This makes her superior and in sharp contrast to the rest of the members of the Chinese culture. Only in such a condition, can Mulan be allowed to be a figurative surrogate for the Western audience in her struggle against the sexist Chinese culture.

The Ballad of Mulan: A Counter Narrative

Interestingly enough, despite the high hopes that Disney executives have had, the film *Mulan* was not well received by Chinese people. It flopped at the box office in China. A common audience reaction to the film in Chinese societies (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Diaspora communities) is that it is neither authentic nor historically accurate. Chinese audience members were generally disappointed by the visual image of Mulan. They complained that Chinese people were not as dark as the Disney's portrait, and the figure of Mulan did not fit in with Chinese ideals of beauty. Many Chinese audience members declared that Mulan did not run away from home nor disguised as a man. One viewer from Harbin, China also disapproved the "inaccuracy" and "inauthenticity" of Disney's depiction: "Hey they seem to be wearing Tang Dynasty clothes but they are practicing ancestor worship which was not introduced until the birth of the Neo-Confucian religion in the Song Dynasty" (Disney is Not the Real World 2004). Ng (2004) pointed out that the matchmaker interview did not exist and the mighty royal dragon symbol was ridiculed into a comical lizard.

Scholars such as Wang and Yeh (2005) also observed a variety of fallacies in this film's representation of Chinese culture, from the story's moral lessons to detailed cultural practices. Djao (2002) stressed that the film trivialised Chinese people's highly cherished cultural heritage. Sun (2003) argued that the feminism facade was maintained at the expense of Chinese culture through the practice of Orientalism (Said 1978) or "negatively projecting difference" (Dissanayake 2006). In order to make Mulan a heroic figure, Djao (2002) and Sun (2003) argue, China was constructed by Disney as extremely sexist.

Admittedly, most cultures, including Chinese culture, are male dominated. The issue is not whether China is the most sexist culture or not, or even whether

patriarchy exists in China or not. The question is what kind of Chinese values are deposed by Disney to reinforce dominant racial and gender ideologies. To embark upon this question, we need to return to the Chinese *Ballad of Mulan*, which the Disney film adapted from, for an alternative frame of reference and a useful starting point for reconstructing new narratives and identities.

There are different versions of the legend of Mulan in Chinese literature. Mulan's story was first recorded as *Mulan Shi* or *Ballad of Mulan (Ode of Mulan)* in Chen Zhijiang's (approximately 568 A.D.) *Gujin Yuelu [Musical Records Old and New]*, which does not exist any more. The current available text of the poem is from the anthology *Yuefu Shiji [Collection of Music-Bureau Poems]*, compiled by Guo Maoqian during the 12th century in the Song dynasty (Feng 2003). According to Guo, this poem was written by an anonymous author in the Northern Wei during the 5th century. Later writers such as Wei Yuanfu (?-771) and Xu Wei (1521-1593) composed different stories of Mulan. Maxine Hong Kingston's (1989) famous novel *The Woman Warrior* was based on the later versions of the Mulan legend, whereas the Disney creation mainly drew upon the oldest available version of the *Ballad*. For the purpose of comparison, the present study discusses the same *Ballad of Mulan* in *Yuefu Shiji [Collection of Music-Bureau Poems]*. The *Ballad* is included in the standard textbook for elementary schools in China. Thousands of Chinese children can recite the poem in its entirety.

The Disney film represented Mulan as a Chinese battling the Mongols or the Huns. The Great Wall was used to symbolise the conflict between the two groups. The Great Wall, however, was built to protect the Chinese Han, the ethnic majority, from northern non-Han ethnicities. But the battle depicted in *The Ballad of Mulan* was set between the Northern Wei and the Rouran, two northern non-Han nomadic groups. Mulan, in the *Ballad*, was a remarkable female warrior of the Northern Wei (386-534), a dynasty ruled by Xian Bei, a northern non-Han people. As a subject of the Northern Wei, Mulan could be either a Xian Bei or a Han. Regardless of her ethnicity, Mulan fought for the Northern Wei. The *Ballad* refers to the emperor as both the Son of Heaven and the Khan. The Son of Heaven was a typical honorific way to address the emperor of the Han ethnicity, whereas the term "Khan" came from non-Han northern ethnicities. Of course, it is ridiculous for Mulan to name her horse Khan, as shown in the film, because it is reserved only for the emperor. By ignoring the internal diversity of Chinese culture and inaccurately representing Chinese and other Asian cultures (e.g., Huns for Mongols), Disney essentially portrays non-Western cultures as monolithic Others and perpetuates the racial hierarchy.

Principles of Filial Piety (孝) and Loyalty (忠)

Contrary to the Disney's theme of individuality, the *Ballad* is about filial piety (孝) and loyalty (忠). In pre-Confucian and Confucian China, filial piety is the ultimate value that upholds the order of the family. The traditional parent-child relationship prescribes kindness or affection on the part of parents and filial duty on the part of children. Filial piety, as the guiding principle of the parent-child relationship, demands sincere respect and moral obedience of children to parents. It delineates how children should behave toward their parents and avoid causing stress to their parents. Endorsed and promoted by the Confucian tradition, "filial piety remains

a moral impulse, a cherished value in the Chinese habits of the heart” (Tu 1997, 172). Although Mulan may or may not be a Han, rulers of Xian Bei aggressively enforced an assimilationist policy and educated their people with the values and practices of the mainstream Chinese culture. As a result, Mulan would very likely be instilled with the Chinese cultural principles of filial piety and loyalty.

In contradiction of the tomboyish image in the Disney film, the *Ballad* portrays Mulan as a filial and dutiful daughter. There was no failed matchmaker interview drama. In fact, such an interview did not exist in ancient China (Sun 2003). The *Ballad* opens with the scene of Mulan waving in the room. Upon learning that her father was enlisted for military service, Mulan was contemplating a solution.

*Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,
Mulan weaves, facing the door.
You don't hear the shuttle's sound,
You only hear Daughter's sighs.
They ask Daughter who's in her heart,
They ask Daughter who's on her mind.
No one is on Daughter's heart,
No one is on Daughter's mind.
Last night I saw the draft posters,
The Khan is calling many troops,
The army list is in twelve scrolls,
On every scroll there's Father's name.
Father has no grown-up son,
Mulan has no elder brother.
I want to buy a saddle and horse,
And serve in the army in Father's place. (Frankel 1976, 68)*

Rather than desiring to free herself from social demands for being a girl properly, Mulan acted from a sense of duty. In the *Ballad*, Mulan did not experience an internal struggle that impelled her to validate her worth and to search for her individual identity. She was thoroughly other-oriented and considerate toward her family and her country. Her decision to join the army was to fulfil her filial duty as a daughter.

There was no hint in the *Ballad* that Mulan had difficulty playing the role of a daughter. As a literary creation, Mulan's name is significant in understanding the character's personality. Chinese names are ideographical and hence more descriptive and defining than European names. Mulan means wood orchid, a kind of white flower. The *Ballad* never referred to Mulan's family name. In *Xingyuan* [Records of Surnames], He Chengtian (370-447) of the Southern Song Dynasty documented the name Mulan with the surname Hua (or Fa in Cantonese), which means flower. Xu Wei (1521-1593), a writer of the Ming Dynasty, adopted this family name in his story of *Mulan*. The elegant and delicate flower symbolises an apt, composed, and graceful girl. The waving scene that opens the poem also suggests that Mulan was fully capable of domestic work that was traditionally assigned to women in China.

Mulan's motivation to join the draft came out of her consideration for her family and her country. Her father was not able to fight for the country anymore, and her younger brother (who was absent in the Disney film) was too young to serve. When summoned by her country, Mulan felt obligated to serve in her father's place.

The Chinese principle of filial piety stresses that we are the continuation of our parents and that our bodies, including our skin and hair, are the most precious gifts from our parents. One should not hurt one's own body in any situation. In ancient China, after childhood, people, both women and men, would not cut their hair throughout the whole life. Thus, Mulan would never have cut her hair before she left home. And there was no need for Mulan to cut her hair off in order to disguise herself as a man like the Disney portrayal. The impulsive, disobedient, and defiant female figure in the film that captured the hearts of Western audiences goes against the grain of the principle of filial piety.

In traditional Chinese culture, just as the family is the extension of the self, the state or country is the extension of the family (Tu 1985). Therefore, the notion of filial piety was expanded to include a person's relationship with the county as loyalty (忠). In some cases, loyalty and filial piety cannot be accomplished at the same time. For instance, going to a war to defend a country is very likely to endanger one's body. It also means leaving one's parents behind without being able to provide for them. In such situations, only with strong urging from the parent, one could suspend filial piety temporarily to prioritise loyalty. The most famous example is the mother of General Yue Fei (1103-1142) of the Northern Song Dynasty who tattooed the characters for loyalty to the country on his back to endorse and affirm his determination to protect the country.

In the *Ballad*, Mulan also did not steal away from home. She bade farewell to her parents before she left home. The verb 辭 (ci), which was translated as "takes leave," connotes a face-to-face farewell ritual in the Chinese language. In their reiterations of the Mulan story, later writers, such as Wei Yuanfu (?-771) and Xu Wei (1521-1593), also stated that Mulan's parents gave Mulan their full permission and sent her off to the war. Although some Western scholars argue that Mulan sneaked out of the house, their interpretations rely largely on different versions of the English translation of the poem, which inaccurately translated the word 辭 (ci) as "steal."

The *Ballad* demonstrates that Mulan was a veteran for twelve years without her gender being exposed. Her decision was fully acknowledged and supported by her parents. Missing from home without a word would cause great grief to her parents, which is not something that a filial child would do. Also, without her siblings' collaboration, her aged parents would not have been provided for during her prolonged absence. The *Ballad* mentioned that Mulan had an older sister and a younger brother.

Furthermore, Mulan's action was not an impulsive decision like the Disney's portrait: donning her father's armor and taking the horse that belonged to her to the military camp. She prepared carefully for the war. She made necessary purchases: a spirited horse, a saddle, a bridle, and a long whip. Given the economic situation in ancient China, those purchases were not financially possible without the support of the whole family.

*In the East Market she buys a spirited horse,
In the West Market she buys a saddle,
In the South Market she buys a bridle,
In the North Market she buys a long whip.
At dawn she takes leave of Father and Mother,
In the evening [she] camps on the Yellow River's bank (Frankel 1976, 68).*

The *Ballad* proceeds to recount the story of the loyal and devoted female warrior who fought hundreds of battles for her country for twelve years. It was her dedication, endurance, leadership quality, and skill as a warrior that earned her promotion in rank. And she fulfilled her obligations perfectly without her disguise being found out until after her demobilisation from the army. After the war, Mulan returned home to resume her role as a filial and dutiful daughter.

However, in the Disney's representation, Mulan enjoyed instant success. She mastered martial art skills and outshined her captain within a very short period of time. She was an intuitive strategist whose impromptu actions (such as launching an avalanche to bury enemies and climbing up the wall to rescue the Emperor) made her the overnight hero of the whole China. Tierney (2006) noted that in recent Hollywood martial arts movies, such as *The Last Samurai*, the white protagonist can master and excel in martial arts with the incredible speed and efficacy that is not available to his non-White counterparts. Mulan, as the surrogate center in the absence of the white protagonist, also experienced an instantaneous transformation from a layperson to a martial art master in the film.

The Disney's claim that Mulan would be killed if she were found out a woman in the army could not have been more wrong. In the Chinese history, there were other renowned figures of female generals and commanders, such as Princess Ping Yang (?-623), She Taijun (934-1010), and Liang Hongyu (1102-1135), who commanded troops and fought wars without masquerade. Women's serving in the army was sanctioned and highly acclaimed in Chinese culture.

Collectivistic Feminism

If the Disney film co-opts feminism into the ratification of racial hierarchy, *The Ballad of Mulan* embodies an alternative form of feminism: collectivistic feminism. Contrary to Disney's emphasis on individualism, the *Ballad* downplays individual or gender differences. Mulan's service in the army was not the fulfillment of individual pursuit, and it did not fundamentally change the course of her life. After the war, Mulan declined all the rewards and positions and only asked for a horse to take her home so that she could resume her role as a dutiful daughter. Mulan was known as someone who made it impossible to tell her apart from her male counterparts, which, rather than challenging gender roles, actually reaffirms traditional Chinese family values (Feng 2003; Djao 2002).

*The he-hare's feet go hop and skip,
The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled.
Two hares running side by side close to the ground,
How can they tell if I am he or she?* (Frankel 1976, 70)

Western feminist scholars often commented that traditional Chinese female warriors, including Mulan, reinforce the patriarchal structure because she went to wars out of filial piety to their fathers or loyalty to their husbands. Thus, rather than disrupting or dismantling the established order, those female military heroines consolidated the Confucian social/moral order. These analyses were part of the Western studies that present a homogeneous picture of gender oppression in traditional Chinese society or under the socialist regime. This type of research presumes the West to be the unquestionable standard against which non-Western cultures are measured and evaluated. By neglecting the complexity and diversity

of non-Western women's experiences and struggles, they essentially reduced non-Western women to a monolithic Other through subjecting their experiences to Western norms and frameworks.

If it is located in the traditional Chinese cultural context, *The Ballad of Mulan* can be understood as an alternative conceptualisation of feminism embedded in the Chinese preference for the collective. The feminist theme in the *Ballad* is also not about the quest for the true self, or freeing oneself from competing demands of different social relations. It is about the loyalties that were formed on the battleground that transcend gender differences and entail a new form of gender equality and solidarity. The famous image of hares conveys an ancient Chinese notion of gender equality by implying that external differences between the male and the female are insignificant in comparison to human potentials to fulfill their social obligations.

Collective feminism in the *Ballad* reflects the profound Chinese cultural views on *the self as a centre of relationships*. Hsu (1983) maintains that the notion of self is predicated on separation in the West whereas the concept of personhood is grounded on connectedness in China. The Western idea of the independent, freely choosing, atomistic individual infers that the pursuit for the true self can be achieved only through freeing or separating the self from other social relations, which are external forces that are potentially oppressive.

In the Chinese cosmology, everyone and everything are interconnected and interrelated. Rather than freeing the self from social relations through separation, the development of the self in Chinese culture is a process of self-perfection through moral development and self-cultivation. The ultimate goal of self-perfection is fundamentally tied to a person's ability to fulfil his or her social responsibilities and to achieve harmony both within the person and with other people. Thus, self-perfection is a process of transforming the private ego to the all-encompassing self that embraces all human beings. Self-perfection is essentially to extend our bonding with parents and immediate family to larger networks of human relationships.

In this view, the self and social roles are indeed reciprocal. The actualisation of the self entails participation of others. Rather than inherently constraining, social relations are crucial for self-development. For the person, self-realisation is essentially the recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe. It is a way for a person to make herself or himself available to the society – to contribute to the human relations that make the development of others possible. Confucius stated in the *Analects of Confucius* (6:30): "In order to establish oneself, one has to establish others. In order to enhance oneself, one has to enhance others."

In the *Ballad*, Mulan, the extraordinary female hero in a collectivistic culture, embodies the Chinese ethos that the worth of the person is determined by whether one strives to fulfil one's obligations to the family and the society (Tu 1998). The *Ballad* values the importance of Mulan's domestic work in fulfilling her responsibility to her family and in sustaining her country. Her gender transformation did not require a separation of herself from the social relations in which she was immersed. It is precisely because of the cooperation of the whole family that it was possible for her to serve a larger collective, her country. Women were freed from the domestic domain with the support of extended family and other kin.

To be sure, Western critics are correct to assert that Confucianism is highly patriarchal. The notion of collectivistic gender equality and the emphasis on equal

moral potentiality advocated by the *Ballad* have been used by the established power to manipulate and exploit women. For example, the Chinese feminist movement championed by the New Culturalists, mostly males, at the dawn of the last century aimed to reform women so that they could be “the same” as men (Wang 1999). Barlow (1994) argues that this male-led feminist movement was a manifestation of a masculinist frame of anti-Confucian discourse. The current Chinese government further pursued the policy of erasing gender differences through appropriating stories like *Mulan*. In this process, a woman is reduced to a genderless worker, the “iron woman.” As a rejection of state ideological hegemony, Chinese women have returned to a biological definition that underscores gender differences since the 1980s (Barlow 1994).

However, feminist theories developed in the West do not necessarily resonate with the concrete and complex experiences and struggles of non-Western women. While appreciating the contribution and spirit of Western feminists, non-Western women should reserve the right to explore the possibility of thoroughly refining, and creatively transforming, their cultural traditions in order to engender a deep sense of gender egalitarianism in dynamic relations with other cultures as a viable alternative to the unrelenting process of Westernisation.

Furthermore, rather than denying or replacing Western feminisms, the collectivistic feminism can complement and enrich them by addressing two of their limitations. First, the individualistic assumption underlying Western feminisms does not allow a conception of rights as a collective good that requires different kinds of rights and restrictions of individual freedom for greater social goods such as harmony, peace, and ecological sustainability. Mouffe (2000) states that individualism indeed poses the eternal paradox of the modern West: Because the doctrine of individual autonomy does not have much concern for communal participation, it thus negates the principles of equity and justice. Without falling in the trap of romanticising cultural traditions indiscriminately, the keen awareness of the interconnectedness of the self and the collective in Chinese culture can be conceptualised as positive empowerment that enables women to fully flourish through communicating and interacting with other members of the collective.

Second, Spivak (1998) contends that in Western theorists, including Western feminists, have neglected and devalued activities and productivity in the private sphere. The tendency of define human relationships in relation to production excludes activities and practices, such as child bearing, childbirth, child rearing, and domestic work, which are as vital in sustaining a community, a culture, and the world as production of goods with exchange values. Prioritising the public sphere only in many cases privileges the freedom of affluent women at the expenses of economically, and often racially, subordinated maids. The idea of equally valuing human activities in both the public and private spheres represented in the *Ballad* has the potential to transcend traditional gender roles as it articulates a different form of human relationships within a society.

Concluding Remarks

This comparative analysis of the Disney film *Mulan* and *The Ballad of Mulan* suggests that the Disney representation is far from being accurate and authentic as proclaimed by the producers and perceived by many audience members in the West.

With its transnationally economic and cultural power and the mantle of unchallenged universalism, Disney has assumed the authority to tell the story of *Mulan* to its audience around the world. On the other hand, *The Ballad of Mulan*, which existed long before that and has been cherished by Chinese people for more than a thousand years, has been marginalised. Disney renders the culture that produced the incredibly woman warrior the most sexist, irrational, and exotic cultural Other against which some styles and needs of feminism were deracinated and co-opted into non-threatening individualism. The altruistic, dedicated, filial, and loyal heroin *Mulan* was reduced to the individualistic girl who is crying to get out of the Chinese system. This strategy simultaneously sustains the existing racial structure and keeps gender patriarchy in the West unquestioned. Dissanayake (1986, 179) notes that the creation of the Other also entails its subjugation and entrapment. "The Other was marginalised, confused, silenced and had a new subjectivity imposed on it, it was categorised and evaluated in terms of norms that were alien to it."

Disney and the supporters of Disney justified their approach under the name of entertainment. For example, Chan (2002, 241) dismisses Chinese audiences' critique of misrepresentations in the film. He avers that the entertainment value or "enjoyability" of a cultural product is sufficient to displace the matter of "authenticity." Turkish people's rage against the false equation of Mongols with the animal like Huns (Turkic) was never answered.

The power of popular culture resides in its ability to convince the audience that the ideologically charged representations are value-natural, factual, or ethnographical accounts. My reading of the film *Mulan* in this study may not resemble the interpretations of audience members who do not see the film through critical lens. Radway (1983) and Bolin (2000) remind us that readers may employ interpretive strategies different from literary critics. Textual analysis is elitist because it privileges the readings of scholars rather than those of the average audience. The arguments made in this essay may be different from the interpretations of ordinary audience members. However, a critical examination of popular culture texts is a political project that aims at empowerment and emancipation. It is an attempt to understand the power of the film as a politically charged cultural text and as part of public pedagogy. I submit that treating popular culture as resources for public pedagogy involves more than deconstructing the power of a particular cultural text in shaping public imaginary. Rather it should be an opportunity for empowerment. That is, treating popular culture as public pedagogy should open up possibilities of re-constructing alternative narratives, imaginaries, cultural spaces, and identities.

In a similar vein, Tanno (2008), Tanno and Jandt (1993/1994), and Jandt and Tanno (2001) argue that an imperative task of multicultural research and education is to decode domination and encode self-determination. If the powerful (such as transnational media corporations like Disney) tries to fix the dominant meaning by reducing the polyphonic, multiaccultural, or polysemic signs and symbols to one direction and suppressing other meanings through articulation, it is vitally important for educators and critical scholars to strive to re-open the discussion and restore the polyphony or multiacculturality (Fowler 1996). Hall (1986) argues that the struggle over meaning is essentially the struggle over articulation.

Further, it is precisely the contingent nature of articulation that allows possibil-

ity of resistance and educated hope. Educated hope, differing from utopian hope, is “an act of moral imagination and political passion that partly enables educators and other cultural workers to think otherwise in order to act otherwise” (Giroux 2000b, 345). Educated hope can be achieved through a critical transformation of “mono-cultural reality” to “multicultural literacy” (Asante 1992). Multicultural literacy requires substantive cultural knowledge of specific cultural communities, apart from the dominant culture, to approach a text. This study, following Asante’s (1992) suggestion, intends to disrupt the mono-cultural reality offered by Disney and to provide an alternative frame of reference for encoding educated hope and self-determination. The introduction of the heroic figure Mulan from the *Ballad* not only challenges the articulation and appropriation imposed by Disney, but also ushers in a new standpoint into dialogues on global communication, ethics, and feminisms. As Chesebro (1996, 13) concisely states, “multiculturalism is a symbolic issue, a question of how we understand ourselves, how we understand our heritages, and how we understand our futures to be.”

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