

Disney's *Mulan* and Unlocking Queer Asian-American Masculinity

By Jess Kung

ABSTRACT. Disney's *Mulan* is a text easily celebrated for its nonwhite and queerable cast of characters. In this paper, I meditate on the ways that this Western interpretation of the myth can be used to explore the intersection between queer gender and Asian-American identity. This paper first looks at the origins of the Mulan myth and its original values of collective goals and filial piety, and then it considers how the Disney movie makes its characters embody "foreign" Western ideas that expose the inherent queerness of Asian-American masculinity. I also take a personal approach, drawing both from theorists and from my experiences as a trans Chinese American to read Mulan's ability to pass as a function of both colonized storytelling and an accidental representation of how the emasculation of Asian-American masculinity can be taken advantage of by the gender nonconforming.

Introduction: *Mulan*, A Key

I am in seventh grade, and I sit alone at lunch. I have found peace on the perimeter of the quad. I am weird, but people leave me alone.

Someone I kind of know walks by with her friends. She says hi, genuinely, then her friends say hi. One of them blurts out, "You know, you remind me of *Mulan*, but I don't know why."

I can only blink at her. I know why. I've known why since I first was able to understand the movie existed, since I first heard my mother tell someone I was a "tomboy." The version of *Mulan* in the 1998 Disney movie was my only point of reference for my trans Chinese American body.

On parts of the internet with fertile ground for queer teenagers to sprout, there is a popular theory about Disney's *Mulan*. It goes that Li Shang, Mulan's captain and love interest, is bisexual. For most of the movie, he believes she is a man. They couple up at the end. Thus, fans say, it makes sense that part of their mutual attraction started before he knew she was a woman. Maybe to Shang, that attraction transcended gender.

It is easy to queer the film. The story centers on cross dressing, gender, and heteronormative expectations. People posit that maybe Mulan is trans, gender nonconforming, or queer in all sorts of ways. For instance, in the ABC show and licensed Disney fanfiction *Once Upon a Time*, Mulan is a tough warrior who experiences unrequited love for a woman. These readings are popular because Mulan is a unique Western representation; she can be claimed by multiple underrepresented groups, especially AFAB queer people.

Mulan as a myth was meant to demonstrate deference to country and family above all else, demonstrating pride in collective struggle. While this can certainly be an avenue for people to find representation and strength in, Mulan is not inherently queer or feminist. But the story can reveal the ways that Asian-American gender, particularly masculinity, falls outside Western norms.

Contextualizing Gender in the Chinese Myth

The myth is hundreds of years old, originating as oral tradition from the North. The earliest written ballad was included in Chinese textbooks for decades, which helped the story stay in public consciousness.

In summary, Mulan is weaving while preoccupied; she is preoccupied not with a person (i.e. romantic partner) but with the fact that her elderly father has been drafted. She takes it upon herself to go in his place, sneakily buying a horse and materials and leaving. Her parents miss her.

She serves for twelve years; and, when the emperor gives out rewards, she turns down a minister position and only asks for a horse to take her home. Her family celebrates, and she shocks her comrades by coming out in her old dress, with her hair fixed and face powdered. That last set-up is the most detailed part.

It ends with dialogue, Mulan addressing her comrades as a woman:

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, 1978, p. 72)

While the story is almost definitely not based on a single real person, it is most plausible as a tale that rose from the Northern Wei people, who were horse-focused and who often trained their women in battle. The story moved south over time, and a version was eventually documented by a monk in the South. Eras later, a northern governor reinterpreted the new popular version of the story.

China is comprised of 56 ethnic groups with distinct traditions and cultures, but it is dominated by a Han majority and homogenized by a unified state as opposed to the smaller shifting states of antiquity. The way this story has transformed over time, even within China, demonstrates continuous shifts in cultural baselines (He, 2013). Mulan becomes Han over time, and her cross-dressing and time spent as a warrior become a more notable exception in the face of Han culture's more rigid gender roles. The story as most Chinese know it is about filial piety, complete deference to the family and to the state. As a mythic character, Mulan has this as her defining trait.

He, studying transgender performance in China through the lenses of Halberstam and Butler, finds that, in many interpretations of Mulan, her crossdressing functions

like Renaissance comedies in England, where the “transvestite” ultimately finds heterosexual marriage and ends their gender transgression, signifying a return to normalcy (He, 2013, p. 630).

According to He (2013), “In the Chinese history, stories of female cross-dressing often refer to the women’s need for self-protection in situations of emergency, their desire for a more outdoor or exciting lifestyle, or the necessity to take part in war and revolutionary activities” (p. 628). While male impersonation has utilitarian value for women, the literature in China is not concerned with their self-realization or identity the way that they are female impersonators. Male impersonators are merely putting on a costume of power, one that they will relinquish at the end of the story.

There are lots of Chinese interpretations and additions to the story of Mulan, many of which are concerned with fleshing out her sense of duty, the clever ways she disguises as a man, or the tragic layers of her situation. While they all add their nuances and ideas about gender in China, I am most concerned with the story that brought this myth to the American mainstream.

Westernizing *Mulan*

Disney’s *Mulan* makes the story more about individual agency and heroism, making Mulan more exceptional than she already is. She goes from filial daughter to rebellious, bumbling tomboy.

The production team was largely composed of non-Chinese people, as this film comes from an era before cultural consultants. This leads to something reminiscent of “Cathay,” a term used by Europeans to describe their imagined China, an idealized alien setting for myth weaving (Hsieh & Matoush, 2012, p. 219-220). The China in the film is an amalgamation of disparate cultural elements meant to appeal to the West, shoehorning in anachronistic references to the Great Wall and the Imperial City.

Mulan becomes representative of Western feminism in the face of a crassly misogynistic China, one where the women in the village are only concerned with marriage and the men in the army are macho, showboaty buffoons.

This is our representation. At least Disney even made the effort to have a mostly Asian-American voice cast. However, we are left with only two characters who can transcend these rigid norms—Mulan and Li Shang, the possible bisexual.

Without casting moral judgements, the movie pits Western feminism and ideas of female empowerment against a world that it depicts as backwards and alien. It wants to empower girls to be “true to their heart,” kick ass, and change the world, but it does so without considering the way that other cultures construct empowerment.

The westernization in the film also uses crossdressing as an invitation for white people to feel more comfortable identifying with Mulan. “Probably for commercial reasons, Disney attempted to authenticate Mulan as the Oriental ‘other’ that, ironically, represents the values of the American ‘self’ in order to appeal to an American and international audience” (Dong, 2006, p. 229). Made an outsider, Mulan is functionally an American character embodied by Asian skin, a situation familiar to most people of color. An exotified body becomes a space for white allegory to thrive in.

There is a pattern among many second-generation Americans of clinging tightly to the parents’ or the grandparents’ culture; you do this especially once you aren’t trying your best to hide it, to forget it, to put on a facade of normalcy that you don’t realize is whiteness.

Asian America is so different from Asia. My mother once told me it was not until the 2000s that she understood why the term Asian-American needed to exist. She was seeing distinct cultures; Koreans are different from Chinese who are different from Cambodian, and so on.

Whiteness paints our cultures the same shade of yellow. We get one Asian at a time.

Asian-American Masculinity

We meet Disney's Mulan as a young woman struggling to meet the strict expectations of femininity set upon her, and she eventually finds her path to honor through disguising herself as a man.

Mulan is read as a man hilariously easily. In the climactic scene, dressed back up in woman's clothes, she gets her enemy to recognize her by lifting her hair up into the bun she wore as a man. When she enters the army camp, despite her awkward posturing and strange behavior, she is never clocked.

The closest she comes to being discovered is in a bathing scene, where she evades her newly friendly comrades by keeping as much of her body under water as possible. They come close, even grab her at points.

This scene was probably written by people who never considered that trans people would watch it, that it is part of a tradition of crossdressing narratives that never acknowledges the danger and violence of being "found out."

In that vein, I have often felt like the othering of Asian-American gender allows me to be read as male easier. Asian Americans, and in this case particularly Chinese Americans, have had historically transgressive sexualities. The anti-miscegenation laws in 1800s California were posited on the idea that Chinese men were sexual deviants with a "predilection" for white women, and that Chinese women were morally lax prostitutes. Dariotis (2007) claims this made them "queer," and that "being able to determine or define someone's 'race' is the foundation of the power of the state to prevent racially 'queer' or 'transgressive' sexuality" (p. 36).

Since then, perceptions have changed, but we are left with the American perception of the emasculated Asian man and the sexual and submissive Asian woman, with no

delineation for their nationality. These stereotypes are applied equally to Asians and to Asian Americans, but Asian Americans feel the brunt.

All Asian Americans live with an expectation of quiet submissiveness, one that we all must subvert in different ways. Maybe it is subverted by glorifying Blackness or by embracing Western individualism. Or maybe your existence is rendered more illegible by being mixed race, or queer, or dark-skinned, or even just loud.

In a study of self-identified gay Asian-American men, Phua (2007) found that potential partners often assumed the subjects would fall into stereotypes. The men were expected to not be well endowed and to be hairless, submissive, smart, and respectful. A high percentage of gay Asian-American men prefer older partners, and there is a prevailing idea that gay Asian-American men are all bottoms. One Southeast Asian participant said this:

I was with a group of friends—all Whites—and we were just talking about what kind of men we like. Most of the time we are talking about other cute White men we came across. Then I asked them what about other races and I really didn't expect the answer I got! They all agreed that Asians are not considered men; Asians are just a different category, one of a kind and different. Asians are simply physically too smooth and soft and act so differently. That didn't stop my friends from sleeping with Asians—they just don't consider them men. Rather some sort of "natural-born gays." (Phua, 2007, p. 914)

Phua goes on to frame this behavior as something that upholds hegemonic ideas of masculinity, particularly the embrace of the feminine role, the search for a "real man," and the lack of discourse or contestation regarding stereotypes. He then proposes an alternate framing, one that sees gay Asian Americans actively working against those ideas, challenging masculine ideals, consciously dating non-white men, but still working off the previous frame and as such, still trapped in it.

Asian-American masculinity, especially queer masculinity, is not manly. It exists on a different plane from other racialized masculinities, easily reduced to boys. This is why I think *Mulan* and I can be read as male so easily; it is easier for us to embody the traits of a more feminine masculinity.

Conclusion: *Mulan*, A Legend

This is all to say that I don't think Disney's *Mulan* is very queer, or trans, or feminist in itself. I think the traditional Chinese ideas it exotifies as a means to draw in audiences are dismissed in favor of a late-1990s Westernized idea of female empowerment, and the adaptation only creates space for queerness by accident, when it needed a love interest, when it needed archetypal European crossdressing humor.

However, that space for queerness is incredibly meaningful. *Mulan* is probably the closest I, a trans and nonbinary Chinese American, have come to being represented in the mainstream. It makes people, especially queer people, happy to analyze bisexual Shang. There is a lot of power in "Reflection," a song about not fitting into womanhood.

The movie is a site to explore how Asian Americans are gendered. What does the feminine masculinity prescribed upon us as a demographic mean? For me, it means I can find solace in my transness by understanding explicitly how genders are constructed around me.

The character *Mulan* pokes at "the logic that seems so inevitable in contemporary U.S. contexts [that] has been imposed and disputed in other times and places," (Halberstam, 2018, p. 27-28) and, while she may or may not fall under it herself, *Mulan* leads one to the trans* umbrella. This touches on something Halberstam, possibly wisely, does not examine as much—the racialized experience of trans* people of color in the U.S.

Out of all the Chinese myths to turn into a movie, Disney decided to use the story of the warrior woman in disguise, the filial daughter. By westernizing the story, they sought to make a story of female empowerment out of one about deference to patriarchal power. By westernizing the story, they turned a simple tale of doing something novel for love of family and country into one of self-realization, of finding identity, and of power.

The movie's philosophy lives in the in-between place Asian Americans occupy, not sure whether it is Asian enough, unsure if it is American enough. I find the movie hard to watch, but I don't think it's bad. *Mulan* let me know that gender could be an option, that there was precedent for a Chinese girl's body to present differently. It helped me read the map. And for that, I guess, I owe her the world.

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