

MULAN: FEMALE CHARACTER'S NEGOTIATION TOWARDS PATRIARCHY

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Abstract

This research is aimed at showing the gender inequality in *Mulan* animated movie (1998). The elements of narrative: setting, plot, and point of view were analyzed through the works of cinematography: *angle* and *shot*. The differences between the male and female gender roles were found by examining the dialogues and the song lyrics. The social construction of gender roles was discussed using the ideology of patriarchy by Irigaray (2004) and the concept of Confucianism by Lam (2016).

Keywords: Mulan, Gender roles, Cinematography, Patriarchy, Confucianism

INTRODUCTION

Movies are the media of literature that use cinematography to present stories in which the social issues are frequently seen. The cinematography in movies is used to show the story, which tells us of what the characters are like, what they look like, the settings, plot and other elements of literature.

Mulan, an animated movie by Walt Disney (1998), adopts the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan from the fourth century. It was directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. The movie was awarded *1999 Academy Awards Nominations: Best Original Score* and *1999 Golden Globe Awards Nominations: Best Original Score; Best Song*. The main character, Fa Mulan, has a strong influence in the story. She is a teenager who is not ready to be a wife, but her family insists her to be married. Then, she screws up her marriage and goes to a battle replacing her father. The issues of how men and women are expected to behave tend to be prominent in many scenes of the movie.

Patriarchy, the ideology that men are superior to women, determines women roles in society based on her reproduction organs' functions to childbearing (Irigaray, 2004). This ideology makes "motherhood is taken for granted as an identity for women" (Woodward, 1999: 242). This feminine mystique, being a wife and a mother as the destiny of every girl, has restricted women in public space (Friedan, 1963). Women's gender roles in society, therefore, are limited to childbearing and childrearing in domestic space. Men's roles, however, are granted more freedom in public space. This ideology, thus, assumes that being female means feminine and male means masculine.

The terms masculine and feminine are stereotypes of "sexual politics" refer to power relation in which the first one is superior to the second (Millet, 2000: 23). Some common masculine characteristics are strong, active, and rational. Meanwhile, the

feminine characteristics such as weak, passive, emotional, are the opposite of the masculine characteristics which become the justification why women have to be under men's supervision. In other words, men determine women's gender roles.

Toril Moi argues that there is a significant distinction between female and feminine; "femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (1989: 116). The first term refers to sex; female's anatomies are different from males. The second term refers to gender, the cultural constructs of femininity for women and masculinity for men. Therefore, there is no assurance that a female person has a woman gender or a male person has a man gender (Butler, 1990).

The story of *Mulan* is taken from the Chinese ballad from between the fourth and the fifth century A.D. of Han Dynasty, "Mu-lanhua" by Tzu-Yeh (LeJuene, n.d.). Mulan disguises herself as a man to replace her father serving the army. After several years, she comes back home and plays her previous feminine roles. The story is adapted to be children books, *China's Bravest Girl: the Legend of Hua Mu Lan* by Charlie Chin (1993) and *The Song of Mulan* by Jeanne M. Lee (1995). In the social context of *Mulan*, Chinese people were exposed to the condition of war in the fourth and fifth century (Klimczak, 2016). The story was written to inspire men to serve the country.



At that time, each gender had its

important roles to bring the family honor (Lam, 2016). The tradition of ancient Chinese culture obligated an adult male to protect and serve his country and it was an honor to die in a war. Whereas, an adult female was obligated to have such good manners and attitudes towards norms in front of someone whom she would be taken as a wife to show that she was deserved to be a good bride. In *Mulan's* time, only men were allowed to join the army and women were strictly prohibited from serving the country. Therefore, women gender roles in ancient China were to get married, serve their husbands, bearing and rearing children (Lam, 2016). A father was the ruler of a family. A woman's marriage was arranged by her father; women were subordinated to men.

DISCUSSION

The Male Characteristics in *Mulan*

While *Mulan* is walking out from her house to be made over to the matchmaker's house; the camera starts shooting from the high position and using the bird's-eye view to show the entire environment from above. This is also to show the condition or space where people are moving in all directions in a Chinese neighborhood. The music and the song follow the scene while showing a boy who is playing fighting using a wooden sword and a girl who is playing with a doll in the low position. This is to show the connection between the children whom *Mulan* is looking at and the lyric that says, "*The men by bearing arms,*" [7:30]. This gives a meaning that men should act with arms or power. Besides, they must be strong and not afraid

of anything in any conditions. In Confucianism tradition, a family holds the ideal principle of filial piety in which the relationship between fathers and sons extends to the relationship between ruler and subjects (Lam, 2016); an adult man has the obligation to obey his parents as well as to fight in a battle for his country in order to show his loyalty to the state and by doing so he brings glory to his parents. In the social context of *Mulan*, a man has the obligation to defend and fight in a battle for his country.

Having failed to impress the matchmaker, Mulan goes home and she hears the drums. Then, she peeps from the rooftop at her house, the view of the town crier and his men from the empire coming towards in the middle of the district is shown from a high position to show the entire men from a distance. Then, the camera shoots the figure of a town crier; Chi Fu appears with the yellow and red flag and a symbol of dragon in medium shot. This motion signifies the symbol and colors of the great empire to give an image of the royal messenger that brings the conscription from the emperor. Next, Chi Fu reads the king's command that "*One man from every family must serve in the imperial army,*" [14:48]. This message tries to tell us that every man in China must be loyal and ready to protect his country anytime when they are needed. In Mulan's community, it is an honor for a man to serve his country; a way to show his loyalty to the emperor, moreover to his country.

After one moment, the Yi family is called out and given the conscription by the soldier. The camera takes the high position and shoots the man from the Yi family

below. This indicates the bravery that every man in China should show. When Mulan's father is about to receive the conscription, Mulan comes toward the messenger and interrupts him while saying, "*Please, sir, my father has already fought bravely*" [15:23]. Right after she gives an excuse for her father, Chi Fu starts to be angry. At this moment, the image of Mulan's father is blurred, while the antagonist Chi Fu is seen clearly. His anger is shown through the camera, showing the medium close-up; focuses on the emotion of the character. This reveals the bad personality or the temperament of the character Chi Fu while telling that he has power over the people in the district. Chi Fu then says to Mulan's father, "*You would do well to teach your daughter*" [15:27]. Slothe & George argue "the traditional Confucian family format reinforces the 'hierarchical social structure' designed to entrench the authority of those in power that of the husband and the father in the family context" in which "father was the ultimate disciplinarian" (Nuyen, 1999: 147). This tells that the role of a father to teach his daughter how to behave like not to interrupt or not to speak at all. As the result, Chi Fu angrily gives reprimand to Mulan's father.

After the incident, Mulan and her family sit together to have dinner. In this scene, there are two contrast colors seen between the background color of Mulan and her father's. When the father says, "*It's an honor to protect my country and my family*" [17:04], the background color is dark to tell the audience that he is in bad mood after Mulan's disrespectful attitude towards the imperial messenger and her father. Again,

this message is conveyed to tell that the Chinese men have the obligation to protect their country and family. In an instant, Mulan questions her father by asking, *“So, You’ll die for honor?”* [17:08], during this scene the background color and the projection of the colors of her dress appear bright. This tells two significant messages: first, Mulan’s big hope that her father will not join the army and second, on the contrary, it is an honor of a man who dies in a battle for his country. By the time her father answers, *“I will die doing what is right”* [17:10], the color has switched to dark again. The expression of her father’s face appears sorrowful and stressful. Both colors and characters’ moods support each other. Thus, in Mulan’s time, a man should know what it is right to do for himself like making a decision and protecting his family. A man is positioned to be a leader and a decision maker in his family.

Leaving her house replacing her father to the training camp, a terrifying scene of Shan Yu appears. It gives a sign that the enemy is approaching and ready to attack this country. After the previous scene showing the terror of Shan Yu in dark background, the movie uses dissolve element for editing to arrange the transition from the previous to the next scene. In this scene, the surrounding becomes bright again to show that the terror has ended. In the woods of bamboo, Mulan firstly tries to learn how to hold a sword while saying, *“They’re manly and tough”* [27:10]. This expression is used to describe how a man is expected. At the campsite, Mulan struggles very hard to adapt and behave like other men. Along the scene when Mushu teaches her how to walk like a man, the

camera uses the full, long and extreme shots in a sequence of events. This is to show simultaneous actions and how the character interacts with the environment at the camp. At the first time, Mushu insists her, *“Shoulders back, chest high, feet apart, head up, and straight”* [29:20], then; *“It’s all attitude, be tough, like this guy here”* [29:49], next; *“Punch him, it’s how men say hello”* [29:55]. Along with this scene, one intact message can be obtained, that a man must have the attitudes and behaviors like what Mushu conveys. This signifies that in Mulan’s community, a man must look gallant, strong and tough instead of showing his weakness. Trying to adapt to the situation, Mulan keeps practicing until she meets Li Shang, the leader of the army. In the next scene, Li Shang, General Li, and Chi Fu arrange a meeting in a tent.

Inside the tent of the General Li, conversations start within the red surrounding background and the symbol of dragon behind the General. This view describes the characteristics of the Chinese official base camp. The General firstly starts the conversation about his plan to attack Shan Yu, then Chi Fu replies, *“Excellent strategy, sir”* [31:21] with which it is followed, *“This is an enormous responsibility, General”* [31:39]. He also insists, *“Perhaps, Soldier with more experience”* [31:41]. These expressions try to tell that men should have an excellent strategy, always be ready to have such an enormous responsibility and well-experienced in war. Sitting on the throne; in front of the symbol of the red dragon, General Li says, *“Number one in his class, extensive, knowledge of training*

techniques, I believe Li Shang will do an excellent job" [31:43]. While describing the powerful man sitting on his throne, the other information can be extracted from the dialogues that a captain should have best achievements as well as have knowledge in term of training techniques. Before leaving the tent following his father, Captain Li speaks to himself, "*The greatest troops of all time*" [31:21]. This expression indicates that the troops are expected to be the greatest, skillful in martial art, well-knowledge and responsible for Mulan's time. Leaving the tent, Li Shang looks confident and ready to train his army. Having Shan Yu defeated in the snowy battlefield, Mulan is expelled from the army because her female identity is caught, however; she keeps following them to the palace.

At the palace, the atmosphere of terror happens when suddenly Shan Yu's eagle takes his sword which has been intended to the emperor. The background color turns to be dark and a figure of Shan Yu appears on the rooftop of the palace. The Emperor is kidnapped by the Shan Yu's men and brought inside the palace. The camera shoots from low position chasing up the men to the front gate and turns to long framing. This is to show the immediate actions that have to be taken to rescue the emperor. On the top floor, Shan Yu draws his sword and insists the emperor bow to him. However, the emperor argues, "*No matter how the wind howls, the mountain cannot bow to it*" [1:11:47]. His statement signifies that no matter what happens, a man will never bow and surrender to his enemy. A paternal figure of a male in Confucianism occupies the

obligation as a leader or ruler who has dignity; besides, he is expected to be loyal to state (Lam, 2016). As the king and the most influenced man in the country, he must not bow to the enemy because the emperor has sovereignty over the kingdom and maintains the public order.

The Female Characteristics in *Mulan*

On the other hand, a female is expected to be well-mannered, well-organized, careful, loving, and caring to her family. Further expected behaviors of female roles are shown in a scene of Mulan's reciting the admonition at her house while getting ready to meet the matchmaker. First, the camera zooms the chopsticks which are being used by Mulan to take a single tip of rice and then some rice to let the audience notice that she is being seriously reciting. Next, a close-up shot is taken to show her serious face while reciting, "*Quiet, demure*" [03:09], "*Graceful, polite*" [03:10], "*Delicate*" [03:13], "*Refined, poised*" [03:16], "*Punctual*" [03:20]. Her recitation tells what a female is expected to be in her time such as quiet, demure, graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised and punctual. Realizing that she has her chores to do, she does her jobs in a rush and goes to serve her father a cup of tea at the ancestor temple.

The scene when Mulan is being prepared to meet the matchmaker is presented along with the lyric of the song that says, “Men want girls with good taste” [07:11], “Calm, obedient” [07:14], “Who work fast-paced” [07:15], “A girl by bearing sons” [07:32], “Like a lotus blossom soft and pale” [07:39], “And to not uproot my family tree” [08:26], “Keep my father standing tall” [08:28], “Please, look kindly on these cultured pearls” [08:44], “Each a perfect porcelain doll” [08:47]. Several camera movements and shots are occupied to relate the messages of the lyric being conveyed. The series of camera techniques like bird’s-eye view, long, medium shots, and close up are used as if they were telling a story. The lyric indicates that the desired girl, a good girl, is the one who is calm and obedient and good at making up herself. Moreover, she is supposed to bearing sons, besides; she also has to work fast-paced. By doing so, she will not uproot her family tree. The song lyric, the phrase ‘a perfect porcelain doll’ then is a representation of female gender roles; a girl is supposed to be perfect, and like a doll she cannot do whatever she wants and she is bound to her owner, in this case, men: her father and then her husband. Therefore, in Mulan’s community, in the ancient of China, “women [are] responsible for caring for children and the household” (Yu, 2013: 5).

At the matchmaker’s house, camera movement operates the high position to show the objects below, Mulan and the other girls. The purpose is to show that the social status of the candidates below is not higher than the matchmaker. At this moment, while the matchmaker is calling Mulan, she replies her

spontaneously. It makes the matchmaker angry and says, “Speaking without permission” [09:10]. It tells that a girl is not allowed to speak before asking permission to the elderly. Before Mulan recites the admonition, the



matchmaker has already said, “Too skinny” [09:25], “Not good for bearing sons” [09:29]. A long shot is occupied to see how the characters behave and look clearly their personalities. At this moment, Mulan’s body is not considered appropriate to be a mother of sons. It points out that girls are destined to be mothers as if “[a]ll they-had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (Friedan, 1963: 16). The idea of this female gender roles mystique tells that a girl is supposed to be a housewife and a female has an obligation to be a mother.

At the same time and place, Mulan is requested to recite the final admonition. Two shots like medium and high angle are dominantly used to relate the behaviors of the characters and the objects. Mulan frequently looks at her note in her arms and she has not completely remembered the recitation. She tries to hide her inability to memorize all the recitation by using a paper fan. At this moment, a medium shot is taken to show a clearer action of the character. The background color behind her looks dark, whereas Mulan’s color looks bright. It

signifies that she is being pushed in the uncomfortable condition because she cannot remember all the recitation completely. Afterward, Mulan nervously says, “*Fulfill your duties, calmly and respectfully*” [09:47], “*Reflect before you act*” [09:53]. Again these dialogues insist how a girl should be, behaving calmly and respectfully as well as fulfilling the duties and reflecting herself before acting. Lai (2007) states that behavioral propriety in Confucianism is often the instrument of practices that oppress women. The social construction insists a female be respectful and calm in behaving as well as to fulfill her duties such as doing house chores and raising up children. Moreover, she must always introspect herself before doing something.

Having her recitation started again, the matchmaker interrupts Mulan by saying, “*To please your future in-laws*” [10:14], “*You must demonstrate a sense of dignity*” [10:19], “*And refinement*” [10:21], “*You must also be poised*” [10:24]. On this occasion, the camera uses editing technique; eye-line match to depict the conversations between characters, the camera first shoots the matchmaker, then it is followed by a shot of Mulan whom the matchmaker looks at and the otherwise. In Chinese tradition, a bride is obligated to please her future in-laws in order to win her future in-law’s heart. “A child bride is taken to ensure her service and filial devotion to her future in-laws” (Lee & Rosenlee, 2009: 274). The dialogues indicate that a girl should please her future in-laws to be well-liked, she must also be aware of her language before talking and elegant in behaving herself. Knowing her cricket is in

the teacup, Mulan grabs it in an instant and makes the tea spilled on the matchmaker’s face. It makes the matchmaker gets angrier and yells, “*Why, you clumsy*” [10:43]. It gives a message that girl should not be clumsy but careful instead. In Mulan’s community, a female is obligated to please her future in-laws in order to have their blessings and she must also be poised to show that she is an elegant girl. Returning from the matchmaker’s house, Mulan gets home and meets her father; however, her expression shows that she is sad.

In her room, Mulan starts to sing the *Reflection* song; the music, the lyric, and camera work associate together to describe the message of the lyric while emphasizing the word “reflection.” This part shows how she questions herself concerning her identity through the song. The next morning, an imperial messenger comes to deliver his conscription notice in the village unexpectedly. Noticing that her father’s health condition is not good enough for joining the army, Mulan takes her father’s place by transforming herself to be a boy in order to be able to join the army, because, in Mulan’s time, a girl is prohibited from joining the army. If she gets caught, a death penalty is given to her. Therefore, in the training camp, Mulan learns to behave like a boy by the help of Mushu.

While Mulan and the troops in their way to fight the enemy, her fellow soldiers are singing; the scene shows a moving painting of a couple falls upon a bowl of rice. It gives a signal that the next image and message need to be projected or delivered continuously. A pile of white rice in a red bowl gives the

audience a sense of food temptation. In addition, a picture of pig and chicken give the idea to the audience what meat the meal is processed. Afterward, the man in the painting sings, “I want her paler than the moon” [48:06], and “*It all depends on what she cooks like*” [48:24]; delivering the additional message that a girl is expected to be good at cooking and putting on make-up. In Mulan’s community, a girl must have cooking and make-up skills to please her husband and her future in-laws. By having this cooking skill, a girl looks more attractive to a man and deserves to be a good wife and a mother.

All in all, the female character in *Mulan* animated movie is expected to be a girl who has behaviors such as polite, obedient, and respectful as well as good at putting on make-up. However, “Chinese women are deprived of access to acquiring culturally significant personhood in the Confucian project self-cultivation” (Li-Hsiang, 2001: 432). This signifies that a female’s freedom to express herself is limited, on the other hand; she must be good at appearance, cooking, and makeup skill. Besides, she must also be graceful, obedient, respectful, and polite in order to make herself gets a man’s attention. If she is all the things mentioned, she will be a girl whom a man desires. In the movie, this is the type of girl that men want in Mulan’s community.

Mulan’s Negotiation towards Her Female Gender Roles

In order to replace her father, Mulan needs to transform herself into a boy; the scene shows the sequence of events in detail from her cross-dressing. Mulan has to take

off her hairpin, cut her hair short, dress up like a boy, and wear a soldier uniform to hide her female identity. Low key of lighting is used to create the atmosphere of danger that suggests the character is conflicted. She leaves her old way of life as a female and has to dress up like a boy. This is done by her because the social condition does not allow a female to join an army. Woman’s life is dedicated to perform household tasks and produce sons (Lam, 2016). A female is expected to do her duties at home, serve her husband and raise her children. Finally, Mulan goes to the training camp to join the imperial army and adjust herself to the men’s behaviors.

In the training camp, Mulan keeps learning the martial art with all the other men. This part shows the red background color that signifies the meaning of bravery. The camera works alternately from low, high and long shots to show the full activities that Mulan and the soldiers do during the training. The music tempo turns a bit fast to let the audience feel the excitement of the actions. This scene shows the real transformation of Mulan emerging from a girl into a soldier. She totally does all the male role parts and has changed temporarily her female identity. She strives so hard to practice a martial art that she is ready to fight in the battle. Eventually, she is successful in the training and ready to go to the battlefield with the other soldiers. When fighting against Shan Yu, she uses her strategy and bravery to beat the enemy like a male soldier. Therefore, this is an essential part of the fulfillment of her



transformation and her victory defending her country like all the other men do in their gender roles. The female role reconstruction appears to happen here.

Having the enemy conquered, Mulan gets the highest respect and salute from the emperor, the soldiers and the people of China. The camera gradually moves from bird's-eye view, high angle, and a long shot to let the audience see the entire people in and around the empire building. In this scene, Mulan is wearing her dress as her identity has already been revealed before. Receiving the honor from the Emperor and all the people of China is the greatest history she has ever made because all the people have accepted her female identity as a warrior. Along with this scene, the color of the background shows the lights of the lanterns from the people and the rest color remains dark with the shadow like spectators. This is to show the number of people who have been witnesses of her acceptance in the community. However, when she gets the offer from the emperor to work in the palace, she refuses it politely and decides to return home to live with her father normally. Having the acceptance from her society is the best achievement; nevertheless, she decides to return back home and obey the tradition of female gender roles. This happens because of her filial duty to bring honor to her father.

In this final part, Mulan meets her father to present him the sword and the crest given by the emperor as gifts to bring honor to her family. At this time, the camera shoots them with a long shot to show the natural view of the surrounding and the interaction between the characters. The blooming

flowers from the background let the audience feel the mood of the characters that indicates the happy feeling. This is the moment when Mulan has her life back normally and behaves like a girl again and this shows what a girl is expected to be in her community. She respects and follows the tradition in her community by accepting what a girl is expected to be in her time, be loyal to her father.

CONCLUSION

Having the movie analyzed, the gender inequality was found between both gender roles. In this movie, the female is expected to behave more in number than the male. She is expected to be quite, calm, polite, demure, poised, delicate, refined, punctual, obedient, respectful, well-mannered, beautiful, elegant, have a certain size body to be able to bear sons. Nevertheless, the male is expected to be brave, strong, loyal to his country, manly, tough, well-knowledge, skillful in a martial art, discipline and a good leader. From these findings, it can be concluded that a female is expected to behave more than a male is. Moreover, Mulan's successfully transformed herself into a boy and does many parts of the male roles prove that gender roles are just social construction. However, having the honor and acceptance from the emperor and society, Mulan decides to return back home and follow the tradition and norms in the community. As the result, the female roles reconstruction fades away in the movie. In fact, the gender inequality can significantly be seen throughout the story. The movie uses

cinematography: camera works, sounds, colors, background music and lyrics to project and describe this inequality of gender roles in the story.

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