Mulan in China and America: From Premodern to Modern
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ABSTRACT
Mulan legend has traveled from Chinese culture to America undergoing the process of cultural filtration. Compared with Mulan in classical Chinese literature, the system of representations behind Mulan in America has undergone variation. But how and why does it vary? And what is the significance of the variation? This paper is going to analyze the cause of the variation of Mulan by reviewing the changes and development in both China and America from the perspective of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. This paper claims that Mulan has developed into a new system of representations via cultural filtering and authors’ reinterpreting when traveling to America. Yet, the cultural codes behind Mulan that have varied do not merely reveal the differences between Chinese and American culture but more importantly the difference between premodern and modern ethics, between ancient China and the modern West.

KEYWORDS
Variation theory; system of representations; cultural filtering; Hua Mulan

摘 要
花木兰传奇从中国文化旅行至美国经历了种种文化过滤。相比中国古典文学中的花木兰形象，美国语境中的花木兰所带来的表象体系已然变异。问题是，花木兰所呈现的表象体系是如何变异的？为何变异？变异的意义何在？本文以比较文学变异学为视角，试分析中美语境中花木兰所承载的文化意蕴的流变之因。文章指出，花木兰通过作家阐释、影视创作移植于美国文化中，并经过文化过滤，甚至是有意改造，产生了变异，进而被赋予了新的内涵，转变为新的表象体系。然而，花木兰背后的文化符码在中美语境中的流变，揭示出来的并非仅仅是中西文化之间的差异，更是前现代与现代伦理、古代中国与现代西方之间的差异。

1. Introduction
Hua Mulan is a well-known legend in China. When it comes to Mulan, who replaces her aged father to be conscripted, The Ballad of Mulan in the Northern and Southern Dynasties is always the most popular and almost the only text that has been mentioned. Yet, there are several different versions of Hua Mulan in different periods of China, which are more or less neglected. At the same time, scholars mainly focus on the effects related to the minority’s ethical appeals and cultural roots brought by reinterpreting Mulan in Chinese-American literary works, such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memories of A Girl among Ghosts (1976), as well as the cultural differences between the East and the West when comparing Mulan in both a Chinese and American context. Yet, few would go
deeper to explore the essence of these differences and changes. Although authors like Kingston personally state her selection and rewriting of some Chinese stories in her works on purpose, it has now been explained how the original Chinese stories ultimately turn into American ones after they are transplanted in American literary works and visual arts, why they vary, and what is the significance behind the variation of the Mulan image, a system of representations.

The so-called system of representations constitutes the concretization of ideology. As Althusser's definition of ideology, "a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society" (231), the system of representations expresses itself as certain images, myths, ideas, or concepts. Hua Mulan, as one of the cultural codes in ancient China, a system of representations indicating the Chinese traditional values of xiao “孝” and zhong “忠” in patriarchal society, has been utilized differently in Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and in Disney movies. The same representation draws different interpretations of its expression of ideology. In spite of that, along with Hua Mulan’s travel from its original culture to a foreign culture, there must be changes of the story of Mulan and the Mulan image due to cultural filtering and literary misreading. Hence, to answer these research questions, the perspective of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, which is a theory that mainly focuses on heterogeneity and variability in the context of cross-language, cross-culture, and cross-civilization, might be helpful.

Thus, this paper is going to focus on the above three research questions based on a comparative study of the female image Hua Mulan in Chinese culture, one of the most popular Chinese stories that has been transplanted to America as well, in The Woman Warrior and in the Disney movies from the perspective of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. By exploring the variations of Chinese stories in an American context, we might contribute to the possible mode of overseas promotion of Chinese culture as well as provide a new perspective to read literary works.

2. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature

Given that the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is a newly constructed theory by Chinese comparatists, it is first necessary to briefly introduce it.

The Variation Theory in Chinese is called “变异数” (Bian Yi Xue), which was initially put forth by Cao Shunqing in his monograph “比较文学学” (The Study of Comparative Literature 184) written in Chinese. The English monograph mainly focusing on the Variation Theory titled The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, in which the phrase “The Variation Theory” was formally and academically used since then, was published by Springer in 2013. Variation Theory is composed of three components. One is “变” indicating the factual experience and “dynamic procedure” (Nan Ju Bei Zhi 61) of “change” when literature travels from one culture to another as well as the effectiveness or the effect of this “change” as it states “To change will lead to the unblocked situation, and then lead to a long duration” (“变则通，通则久”) in The Book of Changes (周易); “异” suggests “heterogeneity,” which is also one of the theoretical foundations of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, including heterogeneity in homogenous civilization, referred to as cross-cultural variation, and in heterogeneous culture, referred to as cross-
civilization variation. But in total, it is “学” in other words, a theory and knowledge of one discipline. The definition given by Cao Shunqing states the following in *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*,

On the basis of crossing and literariness, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is the study on variations of the literary phenomena of different countries within or without factual contact as well as the comparative study on the heterogeneity and variability of different literary experiences in the same subject area so as to achieve the goal of exploring the patterns of intrinsic differences and variability. (xxxii)

It can be noticed that both “crossing” and “literariness,” serving as the research supporting points, have been emphasized by Variation Theory, which remedies the French school’s lack of literariness when engaging in influence studies and the American school’s neglect of heterogeneity of civilization involved in parallel studies. This is because comparative literature does not only need to focus on the empirical relationship of influence among literatures but also on the variations of the literary phenomena without factual contact; it does not only need to cross disciplines but also heterogeneous cultures and civilizations. In that case, variability and heterogeneity, rather than homology or homogeneity, become the two elements of the comparability of Variation Theory. And the goal of the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is to realize “harmony without uniformity” through exploring the modes of intrinsic differences and variability, thus difference has been highlighted to a large degree.

The reasons why variation has been highlighted rather than merely focusing on commonness or unity by Chinese scholars of comparative literature are mainly because of the academic and factual needs.

On the one hand, Variation Theory is able to remedy the shortcomings of both the French and American schools. The French school neglects the variations occurring in empirical studies of literary relationship, although Marius-Francois Guyard has already touched upon variation in the field of imagology by including one chapter “other countries in our eyes” to discuss the issues of image in his *La littérature comparée*, which constitutes the first theoretical study of images (*The Variation Theory* 33). The American school, on the other hand, criticizes the French school’s lack of focus on literariness and expands the scope of comparative literature study by suggesting comparative study among all the disciplines that are relevant to human civilization. Yet, variation that occurs in the procedure of elucidation among different cultures and civilizations has been ignored. The fact is that they even exclude the comparative study between the Eastern and Western world in which they think it is impractical. For instance, Weisstein did not think that comparative literature between Western and Eastern literature was possible since they belonged to two totally different civilizations where no homogeneity exists. No wonder Cao Shunqing once was so astonished by this statement that he questioned it by saying “In that case, it does not mean that we Chinese scholars’ research of comparative study is unreasonable although we have been studying on it for years?”(*Nan Ju Bei Zhi* 7).

However, the truth is that no matter if it is the French school or the American school, both of them have ignored variation and heterogeneity, which is a fact that cannot be denied especially when involving both Western and Eastern cultures in comparative study.
On the other hand, the Variation Theory of Comparative Study constitutes Chinese scholars’ own construction and practice of comparative study, which is also an active response to the problem of aphasia\(^1\) in China, although “aphasia is also a kind of Variation, which is caused by the change of discourse rules” (The Variation Theory 94). It has been over 20 years since the year 1995 when Cao Shunqing advanced the aphasia of Chinese literary theory for the first time. Has this crux of the matter been solved yet? The answer might be negative. Early in the late nineteenth century when the Chinese needed to learn new views from the West due to the historical and social requirements, overwhelming Western theories and discourses enveloped Chinese literature and theories by including the views about comparative literature at that time. For example, Qian Zhongshu’s well-known statement when doing literature research is “No matter it is the West or East, the south or north, we share the commonness” (“东海西海, 心理攸同; 南学北学, 道术未裂”), which indicates the goal of seeking “the same” ending in following the research mode of Western academic views of comparative literature. As a result, Chinese scholarship must rely on Western theories to analyze Chinese literature, which results in the loss of our own literary theory discourse in both China and the world academy.

Furthermore, Variation Theory is not rootless in Chinese culture but in the representation of Chinese philosophy and classical Chinese literary theory. For example, the meaning of “change” involved in the word “variation” can be traced back to The Book of Changes as has been stated previously. And Liu Xie (465–532 A.D.), a literary critic in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, has inherited and reformed the idea about “change” in The Book of Changes to the law of the development of literature, as he states “to combine both inheritance and change lead to infinitude” (“变则其久, 通则不乏”) in his The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (文心雕龙) (Guo 260). As for the practical experience, variation in the process of travel of theory or literature occurred quite early when Buddhism traveled to China and had been Sinicized as Zen (Nan Ju Bei Zhi \(^7\)). In that case, to highlight the variability and heterogeneity of Variation Theory is one practice of constructing Chinese scholars’ own discourse of comparative literature so as to reconstruct the Chinese academic discourse system.

Having discussed the value and applicability of Variation Theory, the next matter undoubtedly concerns the specific research objects. According to Cao’s schematic, Variation Theory includes three categories: Variation Theory in a cross-linguistic context, cross-cultural Variation Theory, and cross-civilization Variation Theory, in which there are several subcategories including medio-translatology, cultural filtering, literary misreading, the theory of imagology of comparative literature, mutual elucidation, foreignization, Chinization, etc. In this paper, the main notion that has been adopted is cultural filtering, “one important manifestation of the subjectivity, selectivity, and creativity of receivers in literary communicating activities” (The Variation Theory 160), which will be discussed in the next section.

By and large, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is a new trend and new perspective of studying comparative literature and of implementing literary criticism, which, in return, reflects the tendency of “academic fields focus on the theory of deconstruction and cross-cultural research” (45), suggesting that the basic ideological orientation of pursuing sameness has shifted the focus to difference. This is the trend in today’s multicultural and hybrid world as well.
3. The changes of Mulan in China

This study is not intended to provide proof of the value and applicability of Variation Theory via implementing a case study, although a new theory or a new theoretical term demands practice to testify its value and applicability indeed, but to probe into the cause of the variation of Chinese stories in an American context and to offer a new perspective of studying Chinese stories in foreign culture based on the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. The focus of this paper is mainly on the female image Hua Mulan in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and in Disney movies.

Before making a comparative study between Mulan in traditional culture and in an American context, the different versions and evolution of the Mulan legend in China should be analyzed first.

The story of Hua Mulan in Chinese culture is not historically recorded in detail except for 62 lines in The Ballad of Mulan formed in the Northern and Southern Dynasties when it first occurs, which is collected into Yuefu Shiji (乐府诗集). However, scholars mainly focus on this version when it comes to Mulan in China and America resulting in the neglect of the changes and development of Mulan in a Chinese context.

In fact, there are several different versions of Hua Mulan in different periods of China, such as the Mulan poem (“木兰诗”) in the Northern Dynasty (386–581), The Ballad of Mulan in Yuefu Shiji (乐府诗集) compiled by Guo Maoqian, Wei Yuanfu’s second Mulan poem (“木兰歌”) in the Tang Dynasty, Xu Wei’s opera Ci Mulan Tifu congjun (Female Mulan Took Her Father’s Place in the Army) (雌木兰替父从军) in the Ming Dynasty, Qing novelist Zhang Shaoxian’s Bei Wei Qishi Guixiaolie Zhuan (The Legendary Story of a Filial and Heroic Girl from the Northern Wei) (北魏奇史闺孝烈传), Zhongxiaoyonglie Qinu Zhuan (The Legendary Story of a Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Heroic, and Chaste) (忠孝勇烈奇女传) written by an anonymous writer after 1732 (Feng 229–245), etc. Although the core cultural codes behind the Mulan image are mainly the xiao (“孝”), filial piety, and Qhong (“忠”), loyalty in ancient China, there are some changes of essence of these two ethics. For instance, in Zhongxiaoyonglie Qinu Zhuan (The Legendary Story of a Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Heroic, and Chaste), the destiny of Mulan is so tragic that she committed suicide when facing the dilemma of both xiao, that is, to return home to take care of [her] parents, and zhong, to serve the emperor, because she could not obey both of these two ethics at the same time (236). This change of the story about Hua Mulan is quite ironic. By depicting the tragedy of Mulan, the traditional feudal ethical codes have been criticized. This is quite a rebellion compared with the ode to Mulan’s xiao and zhong in these traditional or orthodox versions.

While in the operas in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, as Ye Changhai’s study shows, the arts tended to show women including Hua Mulan, Du Liniang, and Li Xiangjun, through which “their talent and their emotion and love to express their self-respect and their aspiration to freedom and happiness” (77) have been mostly written about. The reason can be tracked to the impact on traditional institutions and ideas caused by societal forces and ideological trends resulting in the loosening of mental slavery according to Ye. In such a historical context, Hua Mulan is the epitome of the ethos at that time. For instance, Li Zhi in the Ming Dynasty has written Tong Xin Shuo, Theory of the Childlike Heart (童心说), to claim that a man of letters should keep a childlike heart instead of being tied to the notions of feudal ethics from Liu Jing, “Six
Classics,” or *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius*. Li Zhi even sharply criticized those Confucian Classics just as he claims,

Liu Jing, or *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius* are actually either the ode from official historian or the praise words of other officials [...] Yet all of them are excuses of Taoism and the place where those who lose true intention grow. Thus these works cannot be taught to those who have a childlike heart ("夫六经、《语》《孟》，非其史官过为褒崇之词，则其臣子极为赞美之语...然则六经、《语》《孟》，乃道学之口实，假人之渊薮也，断断乎其不可以语于童心之言明矣。"). (Guo 118)

In fact, Li Zhi’s thoughts are based on such a historical and philosophical background, i.e., intellectuals’ resistance against feudal tradition along with capitalism appearing in the late Ming Dynasty (Guo 119). Indeed, capitalism occurred in an embryonic stage in the late Ming Dynasty when people intended to seek the liberation of personality from feudal ethics. Thus, literary works and opera or even literary theories become the media or the space where writers express themselves and readers find consolation and liberation.

Therefore, the changes of Mulan in China meet the needs of historical society resulting in the development and changes of ideas of or attitudes to ethics and values from premodern to modern. It is hard to judge which version has exerted influence on Western culture; yet, when Mulan travels to the West, its ethic travels and changes.

### 4. The variations of Mulan in an American context

*The Woman Warrior* is widely known by its rewriting and reinterpretation of Chinese stories including Hua Mulan, Yue Fei, and Cai Yan. Because of that, Frank Chin once sharply criticized Kingston’s rewriting in his monograph, *The Big Aiiieeeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), that Kingston has distorted Chinese culture for the purpose of catering to the Western readers’ tastes. Thus, Kingston was excluded in his list of Chinese-American writers who had the Asian-American sensibility.

Is Frank Chin’s view right or wrong? Opinions vary among scholars. However, Kingston directly responded to this question. She explained that what she has written were American people while the myths were American. The question is how the original Chinese stories ultimately turn into American ones by Kingston? Is it just the effect brought by language transformation? Obviously, it is not. Kingston did not make any statement; yet to answer this question, the perspective of Variation Theory might be helpful when involving variation from the original culture to the foreign culture.

#### 4.1. A comparison between Mulan in *The Ballad of Mulan* and *The Woman Warrior*

Since the later versions have changed from the original one, this paper chooses *The Ballad of Mulan* to analyze. In this ballad, “I’ll go and buy a stalwart horse and pad/So as to go to battle for my dad” (Yu 142) indicates Mulan’s primary goal of joining the army is to replace her father’s suffering, symbolizing the traditional Chinese virtue of *xiao*. And Mulan devotes herself to defeating the enemies of her country, reflecting loyalty to the nation. The
system of the representations behind Mulan can be considered one of the concretizations of values in Chinese patriarchal society.

Yet, when Mulan has been transplanted in *The Woman Warrior*, these main virtues have experienced loss yet acquired new characteristics. By comparing two Mulan images in Chinese culture and in *The Woman Warrior*, there are several apparent differences:

(1) The reason for Mulan to learn Kung Fu. What made the narrator of “White Tigers,” the second chapter in *The Woman Warrior*, want to be a woman warrior is that she intends to break the regular pattern of a woman’s life as she says, “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talkstory, we learn that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen” *(Kingston 35)*. It suggests her pursuit of personal value and refusal to the traditional definition of femininity, foreshadowing the tone of the whole story. Consequently, the reason why Mulan decides to learn Kung Fu narrated by this narrator is because she is desirous to avenge the village and to get rid of the role of womanhood as she says, “…not to be pulling sweet potatoes … I was grateful not to be squishing in chicken mud….” *(Kingston 23)*. But there is no information about this aspect in *The Ballad of Mulan*.

(2) The reason for conscription. In *The Ballad of Mulan*, the reason is that “The Khan is summoning the men to fight” *(Yu 142)* while the reason in *The Woman Warrior* is because the baron pledges men from Mulan’s district in order to protect his family from conscription. The former is about patriotism and loyalty to the emperor while the latter is about oppression.

(3) The female image of Mulan. Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* is a woman warrior featuring both femininity and masculinity, which embodies what Virginia Woolf refers to as androgyny, “If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous” *(210)*. For instance, Kingston turns Mulan into a woman warrior by mixing Mulan with the image of Yue Fei, who is well known for his supreme loyalty and patriotism in the history of China. In *The Woman Warrior*, Mulan has carved words on her back as well, the same as Yue Fei. And during the battles, Mulan has a union with her husband and then gets pregnant. Yet, her pregnancy does not bother her fighting; but, on the contrary, the pregnancy contributes to the growth of the power: “I wore my armor altered so that I looked like a powerful, big man,” which results in the formation of androgyny: “Now when I was naked, I was a strange human being indeed – words carved on my back and the baby large in front” *(Kingston 47)*. When Mulan’s baby is a month old, she even gives her husband a great amount of money and sends her baby away from her, so she can become a slim young man, a soldier, again. Throughout, Hua Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* is in a dominant position no matter in the battlefield or in a family ethics relationship.

The actualization of the androgynous image is not because Mulan disguises herself as a male but due to the harmonious unity of both female and male features. This is quite
similar to the notion of ying “阴” and yang “阳,” the balance of two opposites, in traditional Chinese philosophy. And this balance is also employed by Kingston in The Woman Warrior when depicting the relationship between man and woman in the White Tigers Mountain and in the Disney movie Mulan II (2004) as Mulan explains the core of learning Kung Fu,

the first important thing is to be gentle, and, at the same time, we’re being tough […] the world is full of opposites […] to be a good warrior you must bring it all into balance […] earth, sky, day, night, sound and silence, dark and light. (Darrell Rooney and Lynne Southerland)

Only by combining and fusing the two aspects can the mind be fully fertilized and use all its faculties in accordance with Woolf:

(4) In The Ballad of Mulan, the image of Mulan reflects the loyalty to the country and Khan, while Mulan in The Woman Warrior finally leads her army to behead the emperor and inaugurates the peasant who would begin the new order, which reflects Mulan’s resistance against patriarchy.

(5) Mulan as a “female avenger.” In The Woman Warrior, when Mulan returns to her hometown in victory, she kills the baron who makes crimes against the villagers and despises the female as he says, “Girls are maggots in the rice. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters” (Kingston 51). And she also rescues those females who have been carried off by the baron.

However, in The Ballad of Mulan, the depictions of Mulan’s bravery in the battles are very few with only several lines, “She goes for miles and miles to join the war/And crosses hills and valleys with the corps/The northern wind resounds the watchmen’s hail/The chilly moon shines on their coats of mail/Countless men die on the battlefields/While other men return with swords and shields” (Yu 143). And the rest of the ballad depicts the life of Hua Mulan and her family. While in The Woman Warrior, there are a lot of descriptions about how Mulan fought in the wars including attacking the fiefdoms, pursuing the enemies that she has seen in the water gourd, a battle in a forest, beheading the emperor, and killing the baron, through which the courage and heroism of Mulan have been greatly highlighted.

Thus, Mulan in The Woman Warrior, after transplanting the Mulan myth rooted in Chinese culture into American culture, has become a heroine who embodies both femininity and masculinity, and a feminist who resists every manner of oppression of the female, rather than a traditional Chinese female with virtues of both xiao and zhong. And this is the most obvious variation of Mulan.

4.2. How and why the variations of Mulan in The Woman Warrior occur?

In fact, the original literature and culture would experience changes and variations during the process of overseas promotion, transmission, and translation, which is inevitable because of the different “cultural modes,” according to Wai-lim Yip’s concepts.
Is variation of the culture a negative effect or not? The truth is Chinese culture has been changed through Kingston’s rewriting, which contributes to the construction of new cultural images in American culture as well. Ultimately, it is a Chinese-American Mulan or even American Mulan instead of Chinese Mulan as Kingston sates:

Sinologists have criticized me for not knowing myths and for distorting them; pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. They don’t understand that myths have to change, to be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. (Patell 555)

But why must myths finally become American? How is the variation realized? In reality, the whole process of literary variation is complicated in that there are various factors contributing to it.

On the one hand, it is the author’s own selection and choice in terms of “cultural tradition” and “value standard” in the light of Cao’s notions. Maxine Hong Kingston was born in America and educated in an American school. What Kingston has received is Western culture. Yet, Chinese culture also exerts great influence on Kingston at the same time resulting in a hybridity of both Western and Eastern culture. Take the rewriting stories in *The Woman Warrior* for an example. In spite of the Eastern myths that she has written in *The Woman Warrior*, she also borrowed several stories from Western culture. She even mixed both Eastern and Western myths via interweaving two similar images with different cultural meanings:

In fact I also used the Western myths, mixing them with Eastern myths […] I used Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* when Fa Mu Lan goes into the mountain […] Rabbit is also a Chinese legend and a Buddhist story. Buddha has a rabbit jumps into fire and become meat so that hungry people can eat. That is the Eastern story. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the rabbit doesn’t get eaten up. So I mixed the Western story and Eastern story because I feel that this integration takes place in the mind of a child, the mind of the Chinese American child. (Zhang 19)

Kingston’s knowledge about China and Chinese culture came from several channels including her parents’ talkstory, translated Chinese literature and films from both Hong Kong and Hollywood from the perspective of Mesologie, just as Kingston says,

My father and mother would tell me all of those stories. Falling asleep, stories become very mixed. The myths I put in my book are the movies, Hong Kong movies and Hollywood movies. When I wrote, all those images occurred to me […] I read Li Po and Tu Fu in translation […] Then I’ve read Chinese fairy stories […] Mostly I heard talk-story in Chinese, Cantonese from my mother. (Zhang 20–21)

Therefore, in such a hybrid cultural background, Kingston’s writing would be affected by both Western and Eastern culture.

For the translation of *The Ballad of Mulan*, there are at least five well-known versions including Charles Budd’s in 1912, W.A.P. Martin’s in 1912, Arthur Waley’s in 1936, Wong Xianliang’s in 1985, Xu Yuanchong’s in 1988, and Wang Rongpei’s in 2008, among which Charles Budd’s and Martain’s versions have enjoyed great reception and success in the English world (Wang and Liu 183). Although it is hard to empirically investigate which version of Chinese fairy tales exerts great influence on Kingston, it can be noticed that Kingston has processed and varied these stories on purpose or
unintentionally since what Kingston has known about Chinese stories is not the original one but the one that has experienced loss, additional information, or filtering.

Kingston explains in an interview that although the stories about Mulan and Yue Fei are distinct, she weaves them together on purpose,

I wanted to write about the power of woman, and gave her man’s powers by giving her man’s story. If a woman knows the story about a great hero who is a man, she uses his ability and ideals for herself. Then she will become stronger. (Zhang 19)

In other words, in order to shape a strong woman warrior and to break the stereotype about Asian women like Madame Butterfly, Lotus Blossom, or China Doll, all of which reflect weakness, obedience, or fragility, Kingston shapes a woman warrior by filtering the ancient Chinese cultural codes behind Mulan but adding the heroic features to this female image by highlighting the battles and combining the story of Yue Fei simultaneously. Hence, it meets Kingston’s own understanding of changes of the story as she says in another interview, “the story changes along with talking story each time and each story-teller gives the story his or her own voice and spirit. Thus story travels from culture and language, talkstory and text, back and forth” (Shan 224). This process causes the procedure of cultural filtering,

the selection, transplantation, transformation, and reconstruction of communicating information by receivers according to their cultural tradition, realistic context, value standard, and aesthetic habits, whose result is the Variation of the original communicating information within an indigenous context. (The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature 160)

One fact that has been ignored as to the rewriting of Chinese stories is the social and historical cause of this variation which is closely related to the author’s own cultural tradition and the realistic context. Maxine Hong Kingston was born in 1940 and earned a bachelor’s degree in 1962 from the University of California, Berkeley. During the 1950s and 1960s in America, the civil rights movements together with feminist movements swept across the North American continent, causing the emergence of deconstruction and feminism in the 1960s thereafter (Habib 561). In that case, it is hard to say that Kingston has not been influenced by these historical events. And in the 1960s and 1970s, these social movements contribute to the multicultural environment. Thus, the variation of Mulan in The Woman Warrior can also be the product of social and historical pursuit and the requirement of feminism and multicultural literature. This variation is because of the social context, the necessities of the society as well. In turn, the ideology, as the system of representations, is always interspersed in the text, which has been specifically presented as Hua Mulan and the feminism behind this image. In that case, literary text becomes the manifesto of Kingston’s individual value and feminism.

Based on the above comparative analysis, it is reasonable to say that Mulan in The Woman Warrior carries Kingston’s notion and value toward Chinese traditional ethics, femininity, or even modern Western values about humanity at large, among which a strong sense of feminism is protruding here.
4.3. The trajectory of the variation of the Mulan image in both literary works and Disney movies

With regard to the image of Mulan, another two figures from Disney cartoon films, *Mulan* released in the year 1998 and *Mulan II* in 2004, cannot be ignored. In *Mulan*, the initial goal for Mulan’s journey to the battlefield is to seek self-knowledge and personal value as the lyrics in this film foreshadow,

I will never be a bride or a good daughter. Can it be I’m not meant to play this part […]
who that girl I see, staring straight back at me. Why is that reflection that I don’t know?
Who I am? When will the reflection show who I am inside?. (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook)

And when Mulan is confused by her decision to replace her father in the battle, she says, “Maybe I didn’t do that for my father […] maybe what I really want was to prove that I could do things right” (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook). Undoubtedly, the director’s focus is on Mulan’s seeking of personal value, bravery, and wisdom, all of which reflect individualism as well as “a new kind of treatment of feminism in popular culture” (Yin 54), as Mulan has been depicted as a strong and independent girl who wins victories in the battlefields without others’ assistance via wise skills differing from slaughtering with weapons like Mulan does in *The Woman Warrior* as well as the case of other Disney princesses.

*Mulan II* seems to be totally discursive from the original Mulan myth and Mulan in the first Disney film but still praises Mulan’s heroic deeds. In this version, the story is mainly about Mulan and Li Xiang’s emotional development, as well as Mulan’s attempt to save and emancipate three princesses who are suffering from arranged marriages. As a result, a woman warrior becomes a savior of women and a female who insists upon freedom of marriage by following one’s own heart when deciding between duty and heart. Although Mulan in *Mulan II* cannot escape from the doomed Disney Princess destiny, namely, always waiting and needing to be saved by a prince, Mulan is still an image qualifying feminism and that always keeps searching for herself.

There is also a trajectory in terms of the changes of Mulan in literary works and visual art forms when Mulan has been transplanted to America. Feminism in Disney movies is not that intense and overwhelming compared with that in *The Woman Warrior*. There is no doubt that the motif for this variation is caused by the commercial selection of the theme and ways of expression to fit the universal taste of the audience when facing the modern tendency of feminism and the commercial market. For another, it also protrudes on the American modern view of traditional ethics and values of Chinese cultural codes behind Mulan, feminism in the 1960s and individual values in Western culture. Guided by Disney’s principle of presenting universal themes, “Disney appropriated the Mulan story into its typical formula of a hero’s journey of self-discovery” (Yin 58). Instead of pushing feminism to an extreme by overthrowing the relation between female and male or to highlight female power by absenting or belittling the male on purpose, the Mulan image has been transformed into a modern understanding of female and human value.

In such a modern or even postmodern world, a space where people emphasize criticism, break any authority or center, and pursue subjectivity which contains
individualism, criticism rights, liberal behavior, and idealism according to Hegel’s view about modernity (Zhou 3), people have to find certainty about themselves and the world after all these certainties have been shredded by the emergence of modernity and postmodernity. After certainty has been torn up, what is left for us? It is an important question. Thus, people turn to the legend in ancient China and transform its authenticity to a Western cultural vessel where people are able to have their soul ensconced. This theme about the individual value pursuit in the shape of the Mulan image in Disney movies is an open door, through which modern people are able to start research for themselves and ask the eternal philosophical questions: who am I, where do I come from, and where should I go via breaking the bondage from traditional views of femininity along with the life values of humanity and embedding such a Chinese legend in Western culture. In other words, no matter if it is Mulan in The Woman Warrior or in Disney movies, Mulan is the specific reflection of a modern understanding and transformation of traditional ethics and the values about women and even humanity at large. And different arts media hold different attitudes to and ways of expressions of it. This variation does not end here. The Disney Company is going to shoot another version of Mulan in 2018, in which characters are real actors instead of cartoon characters (Coggan 10).

5. Conclusion

Mulan has developed into a new system of representations through cultural filtering and the authors’ reinterpreting in an American context. Yet, the cultural codes behind Mulan, the system of representations of traditional ethics, which have variated after traveling to an American context, do not merely reflect the differences between Chinese and American cultures but more importantly the difference between premodern and modern ethics, between ancient China and the modern West.

This is not a single example. Lu Xun has rewritten some Chinese traditional myths and published them as Old Tales Retold (故事新编), which is a reflection of the modern view of the traditional value system and the historical society at that time; British writer Jane Rhys has rewritten the classical work of literature Jane Eyre and published it as Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966, which criticizes the oppression of imperialism and the patriarchal system; Frank Chin has reshaped the Guan Gong image, who is more like a hero from Hollywood rather than from Chinese culture, in his novel Donald Duck (1991), to reconstruct the masculinity of Chinese-American males; Kingston rewrote “The Land of Many Perfumes” from Flowers in the Mirror written by Li Ruzhen in the Qing Dynasty and adapted the story of Robinson Crusoe in her work China Man (1980), another integration of Eastern and Western culture. And in her novel, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1990), Kingston adapted the Chinese legend of the Monkey King, who is also the protagonist in the Chinese classical novel, Journey to the West, written by Wu Chengen in the Ming Dynasty, to construct Chinese-American cultural identity. If it is reasonable to say that Chinese-American writers’ choice of varying and rewriting Chinese stories is partly because of their Chinese heritage mingling with Western culture, then how about the variation of Chinese stories in non-Chinese American writers’ works? In fact, Native American writer Gerald
Vizenor’s novel, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), has also rewritten Chinese stories. The above examples invite further research.

### Notes

1. “Aphasia” is primarily a term from medical science. It is Cao Shunqing who first introduced this term to literary theory study and used it to reveal the status quo of literature study and criticism in contemporary China. Thus, aphasia refers to the loss of discourse of literature criticism and study in China and in the world academy. To be more specific, Chinese scholars usually depend on Western theories to analyze Chinese literary phenomenon. For instance, they adapt romanticism or realism to analyze poetry of the Tang Dynasty resulting in some misreading. As a result, we Chinese cannot understand our own culture any more just as François Jullien once said in an interview. For more information please see Cao Shunqing, 《21世纪中国文化发展战略与重建中国文论话语》，《东方丛刊》，1995年第3辑，第213–227页 (Cao Shunqing, “Chinese Cultural Development Strategy and Reconstruction of Chinese Literary Theory Discourse in 21th century,” *A Multidimensional Study of Orientalism*, 3 (1995): 213–227), Cao Shunqing, 《文论失误症与文化病态》，《文艺争鸣》，1996年第2期，第50–58页 (Cao Shunqing, “Literary Aphasia and Cultural Pathology,” *Wen Yi Zheng Ming*, 2 (1996): 50–58), 秦海鹰，《关于中西诗学的对话—弗朗瓦索·于连访谈录》，《中国比较文学》，1996年第2期，第82页 (Qin Haiying, “A Dialogue between Chinese and Western Poetics: An Interview with François Jullien,” *Chinese Comparative Literature* 2 (1996): 82).

2. *Liu Jing*, or “Six Classics,” includes *Book of Songs* (诗经), *Book of History* (尚书), *Book of Rites* (礼记), *The Lost Book of Music* (乐记), *Book of Changes* (周易), and *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋).

3. There are a number of discussions about terms like premodern, modern, or postmodern as well as the relevant concepts including premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity, yet opinions vary. In order to define premodern and postmodern, we should first answer “what is modern?” In reality, the ways to divide the above three periods vary differently in the East and the West or even among Western countries. It is true that time is the standard to divide these three periods but it is not the only one. More importantly, we need to turn to the social formation and ideas behind the occurrence and changes of these terms.

In general, modernity in the West started in the seventeenth century, which is related to the development of capitalism and relevant changes of people’s thoughts including emphasizing criticism and innovation. Additionally, “Modernism, modernist and modernity followed, in C17 and C18,” but “conventional contrast between ancient and modern was established before the Renaissance” according to Raymond Williams (for more information please see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised edition, New York: Oxford UP, 1983, 208) while in China, the ending of kingship marks the beginning of modern society in spite of the occurrence of small-scale modernity in the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, in the late Ming Dynasty, “many works of opera distinctively demonstrate individuality and individual value of females and at the same time reveal various social problems concerning women” (for more information, please see Ye Changhui, *Ming and Qing Operas and Female Roles*, *Theatre Arts* 4 (1994): 77), which hints at people’s turn of consciousness. Premodern refers to the period before modern, which particularly indicates the stage when people conform to one authority and one center including the ancient and patriarchal ethics in this paper. Postmodern developed from modern featuring a break from authority and any center including modern but constructing nothing.

4. These lines in Chinese: “愿为市鞍马，从此替爷征。’”

5. These lines in Chinese: “万里赴戎机，关山度若飞。朔气传金柝，寒光照铁衣。将军百战死，壮士十年归。”
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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