

The Study of the Image of Mulan from the Perspective of Gender Performance and Linguistic Semiotics: A Comparative Analysis of Literary Illustrations and Film Pictorials

Mufei Hong *

College of Arts, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1210109020@cnu.edu.cn

Abstract. The theme of "women disguising as men" is an important phenomenon in literature, especially since it is a traditional theme in China's literature. It not only demonstrates the courage and wisdom of women, but also reflects the changes of the times and the progress of society as a mirror. Among the many stories of "disguise", the story of Mulan is one of the most influential stories in the history of Chinese literature. With the development of the movie industry, the story of Mulan has gone out of the country and set off a wave of "Mulan fever" in the world. Illustrations, movie posters and other visual materials in literary works combine images, colors, words and other forms of multimodal resources to construct meaning. They play an important role in enhancing the visual appeal of the works, assisting in understanding the contents of the works and enriching the emotional expression of the works. Through the analysis of the theory of performance, multimodal discourse analysis theory, and comparing the image of Mulan in China's native illustrations and Disney movie posters, scholars can see a unified vein - the continuous awakening of self-awareness and the deepening evolution of feminism. This study hereby can provide certain guidance for the development of contemporary youth, especially females.

Keywords: Feminism, theory of performance, pictorial narrative.

1. Introduction

The theme of "women disguising as men" is an important phenomenon in literature. These pieces serve as a mirror for societal advancement and historical shifts in addition to showcasing the bravery and knowledge of women. In the initial mainstream literature, women were often portrayed as weak and passive characters, but with the progress of society and the liberation of ideas, the image of women began to change. Gradually, they walked from behind the scenes to the front stage, freed themselves from the constraints of their families, and bravely faced the challenges of society. In the theme of "disguising as men", scholars can see that women enter society by disguising themselves as men, pursuing their ideals and aspirations. They may ride into the battlefield to build up meritorious achievements; they may sit for the imperial examinations and win; they may even break through the constraints of feudalism to boldly pursue true love. These works not only show the courage and wisdom of women, but also reflect their pursuit of equality, freedom and dignity. Therefore, through the study and sorting out of these works, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the process of ideological progress and human emancipation in literary works and to see more clearly how feminism has evolved and deepened in the flood of history.

A common matriarchal motif in Chinese native literature is "women dressed as men", which translates to "disguise". It describes a female who changes her true gender by dressing or applying cosmetics that make her appear like a man, and participates in social activities as a male. As early as in the folk song Little Sister Li Bo from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, there once appeared such a vigorous and heroic female rider; contemporaneous the Mulan Ballad is more narrative, depicting the social reality of the invasion of the military and the constant conflict between the two. It depicts Mulan, who disguised herself as a man and served in the army for her father for twelve years. In the early Tang Dynasty, it became a social trend for women to dress up as men [1]. Among the "disguise" stories, Mulan's story is a type with great influence in the history of Chinese literature. From the Mulan Ballad to various contemporary films, television dramas and opera works,

the Mulan story has been active in various genres of literature such as novels, operas and poems for more than a thousand years, and it still has a strong influence on people's spiritual culture.

As a hotspot of academic research, previous studies on the story of Mulan have mainly focused on verifying the era of the emergence of *Mulan Ballad*, studying the theme of it, and the Zaju of *CiMulan*. These studies have achieved significant results and solved some problems, but there are still shortcomings [2]. First of all, the current academic research on Mulan stories focuses mainly on the in-depth study of single works, while the longitudinal study on the flow of Mulan's image and the development and evolution of the story is not sufficient. Secondly, research on the story of Mulan mostly focuses on textual analysis, with less attention paid to illustrations such as posters in dramas and movies, leaving a significant research gap in this area. Based on the above considerations, this paper selects the image of Mulan as the research object and compares the evolution of its image in China and its image in overseas works. Using a combination of textual reading and graphic analysis, we analyze the image of Mulan as it appears in textual illustrations and movie posters, and explore the female consciousness and self-identity behind the act of Mulan's cross-dressing, with a view to guiding contemporary youths to better development.

2. Local Analysis of Mulan's Image - Taking *Mulan in the Army* as an Example

2.1. Historical Evolution of the Theme of "Disguise" in Chinese Literature

The folk songs *Little Sister Li Bo*, *Mulan Ballad*, and the Ming Dynasty miscellaneous dramas *CiMulan*, and *Female Scholar Resigning from the Phoenix* are all about the same type of story. The Mulan story is one of the most influential in the history of Chinese literature. As a representative work of the Northern dynasty music folk songs, freedom is its basic aesthetic style. Analyzing *Mulan Ballad* with the theory of Procrustean Narrative, the passage of Mulan's military service can be sorted out according to the one-dimensional direction of time as follows: a female disguises herself as a man, joins the army on her father's behalf, goes on a ten-year campaign, and is rewarded with a reward for her return to her home. According to the logic of combing, the behaviors of "enlisting on behalf of the master", "preparing for the army" and "being given an official position by the emperor" were all things that could only be accomplished by a male identity at that time. Mulan jumps out of the gender quagmire of society with her own strength and acquires a man's profession in literature and martial arts to build a career for the country. This has made the work enduring.

2.2. Róng (Campaign) and Róng (Appearance) in Textual Illustrations

Illustrations in ancient literary works play an important role in enhancing the visual appeal of the works, assisting in understanding the contents of the works and enriching the emotional expression of the works. There is a considerable wealth of Mulan illustration content in China's native land, and they not only show the heroic deeds of Hua Mulan, but also pass on the essence of Chinese culture. *Mulan in the Army* published by Lianhuanhua Publishing House in 2019 is based on the traditional Chinese painting style, integrating Róng (Campaign) and Róng (Appearance), making the illustrations delicate and flavorful, and displaying Mulan's unique personality and spiritual outlook [3].

Part one of Figure 1 depicts the situation of Mulan's horse leading the way, standing up and going forward to kill the enemy camp. In the picture, she is dressed as a man, with a helmet, iron armor, and saddle, which is a picture of a valiant boy. Analyzed from the perspective of composition, the visual center of the whole picture is Mulan sitting on the horse holding a spear. Behind her, a combination of real and imaginary painting techniques is used, with smoke replacing the thousands of troops and horses, while she is in the front line of the battlefield. In contrast to her are the enemy soldiers in the lower left and right corners of the picture. They not only contrast with Mulan in terms of number, but also in terms of expression and demeanor, providing a foil for Mulan, who is calm and unruffled in the face of danger. It also highlights Mulan's valor on the battlefield, which is Mulan in the state of "military uniform".



Figure 1. Róng (Campaign) and Róng (Appearance) [3]

Part two of Figure 1 depicts the scene of Mulan after returning from the battlefield. She takes off her battle dress and puts on a dress and skirt, and looks in the mirror to trace the makeup that belongs to women. The mirror reflects Mulan's appearance, with her hair coiled in a high bun behind her head and a budding flower in her hand, which is intended to embellish the beauty of the mirror. At the same time, some details can also be observed, such as the bow and arrows and sharp blades hanging high on the wall, as well as the armor placed aside. Therefore, it can be seen that although Mulan has regained her daughter's body, she has not completely severed herself from her pre-disguised self. It should be said that the person she was in the past has made her the person she is now.

2.3. Theory of Performance

As a performative concept of gender, the theory of performance was introduced by Judith Butler in her critical work *Gender Trouble*. In a chapter titled "Subversive Body Behavior", she writes that gender should not be constructed as a fixed identity, or as a mediated position to which behaviors are subjected, but rather as an identity that is constructed over time, and constituted through stylized repetitive behaviors in an external space [4]. This means that the gender of people who exist in society is not some fixed identity, and some people, like actors, constantly switch genders to perform. Thus, the act of a female who, like Mulan, has become a man in literature and martial arts, choosing to participate in society as a man, constructs a gender performance that transcends gender binaries. It is in the process of cross-dressing that gender switching is realized. However, there is a contradiction in Mulan that is difficult to reconcile - "campaign" and "appearance". They are two aspects that mutually balanced. When Mulan chooses to show her true face, she has to put down her "military uniform"; and her military uniform is a cover for her real identity. She is like a dedicated theater actor who would not easily shed her manly clothes if she did not have to achieve her goal. On the stage of society, she continues to dance and sing, bringing a grand performance to the world.

3. The Overseas Flux of Mulan's Image: Taking *Mulan* (1998) as an Example

Mulan's Story has been widely sung since its release, not only included in compulsory education textbooks, but also recreated in novels, operas, dramas, movies, TV dramas, music, etc. In 1998, the Disney movie *Mulan* (1998) was released, which undoubtedly set off a wave of "Mulan fever" in China and even in the world. In fact, as early as the end of the 19th century, the story of Mulan had already gone out of the country. In 1881, the American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin published his book in the United States, which included his translation of the "Mulan Story". Disney released the animated movies *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan II* (2004) and the live-action movie *Mulan* (2020), which subsequently aroused extensive attention from scholars at home and abroad [5].

3.1. *Mulan's Image in *Mulan* (1998)*

Disney's rewritten cultural image of *Mulan* is clothed in traditional Chinese culture, but in its essence, it is a new Chinese female's cultural image that actively pursues democracy, equality and freedom [6]. The movie adaptation of *Mulan* (1998) is a real break with male persuasion. In terms of characterization, the "gender performance" element is cut down. The film adaptation creates a mismatch in *Mulan's* identity - as a female who is supposed to "abide by female virtues". However, it exhibits male characteristics everywhere, such as being good at horseback riding and not fond of applying makeup. Thanks to her courageous nature, she overcame challenges in the military camp and won the respect and even admiration of her peers. Therefore, it can be said that *Mulan* herself carries these manly qualities, which help her to be recognized in the male group. Yet she is out of place in the female community. Like the blind date in the opening scene of the movie, *Mulan* arrives late with her horse and whip and is scolded by her mother and the matchmaker for her uninhibited speech and her lively personality.

Beauvoir believed that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." [7] Therefore, rather than military life endowing *Mulan* with male traits, *Mulan* inherently possesses two gender traits. The reason why feudal society was feudal was that it denied various possibilities, solidified women's temperament in the appearance of women that matched men's hearts, such as gentleness and softness, and regarded all characteristics that did not conform to women's temperament as oppressive anomalies. In addition, it can be seen that society's constraints on women come not only from men, but also from women who abide by the constraints, such as the matchmaker in the film. *Mulan* did not embark on the path of suppressing her nature. Instead, she utilized her strengths to seek life value through building a military and career.

3.2. *Róng (Campaign) and Róng (Appearance) in Poster Design*

As a business card of the movie works, movie posters combine images, colors, words and other forms of multimodal resources to construct meaning, intuitively and prominently display the theme of the film, and achieve good publicity effects. The following two posters of *Mulan* (1998) are selected for sample analysis:



Figure 2. *Mulan* (1998) Posters [8]

The theoretical basis of multimodal discourse analysis is Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics, which provides a theoretical foundation and analytical method for analyzing movie posters. According to the framework of visual grammar analysis, *Mulan's* (1998) poster embodies the reproduction meaning, interaction meaning and compositional meaning of the movie.

From the perspective of composition, *Mulan* occupies the visual center of the picture in part one of Figure 2, and the direction of *Mulan's* line of sight is the same as the direction of the warhorse's

gaze, which constitutes a reaction process, which seems to be looking at her hometown and seems to be heading for the military camp, reminding people of "But only on north mountains Tartar horses neighs", which then awakens the viewer's memories of *Mulan Ballad* and becomes a prelude and a prelude to the content theme of the film conveyed by the poster. It becomes a prelude and a pad for the poster to convey the theme of the movie. From the coloring point of view, the birds in the sky and the reflection on the lake are in a calm and cool tone, which belongs to low-mood images. As the eye moves upward, it sees atmospheric Chinese traditional characters and a lifelike golden dragon. At this point, the background has moved to a warmer tone that matches the color of the text, making it a high-mood image. The rendering of the color red breaks the serene atmosphere and adds a touch of tension and urgency.

The types of combined elements in the composition of part two of Figure 2 are not as rich as those in part one, but they are more visceral. Mulan is both at the center of the picture and the visual center. She is coated with rouge in a quiet and beautiful manner, with her long hair tucked into her ears and the corners of her mouth tilted up to the right position, making her look like a generous young lady.

Throughout the picture of the sword but caused a visual split. The surface of the sword is like a mirror reflecting Mulan's face. It was the military attire of the clumped army. In the shadow, her long hair is tied up and she is glowing, showing a sense of youthful exuberance that belongs only to teenagers. Compared to the low-emotion image in Figure 1, the background of part two of Figure 2 is dominated by big red, and the overall saturation of the picture is high, which is a high-emotion image, and lays down a passionate and overflowing romanticism tone for the movie.

In the process of viewing *Mulan* (1998) poster, the viewer completes a series of processes from exposure to the poster to deconstructing the image, eliciting memories, receiving information, and then generating associations. In this path of transmission, the viewer's memories of past Disney princess movies are evoked. From the gentle and kind-hearted Snow White, to the well-read and adventurous Belle, to Mulan, the image of princesses is constantly changing, from passively waiting for the prince to rescue them to being active and aggressive to change her destiny, which gives a glimpse of the rise of female consciousness. The poster of the movie *Mulan* (1998) vividly portrays the spiritual essence of the film, portraying a heroine who does not love the pulchritude but loves the military.

4. Discussion: From "Women Dress Up for Their Beholders" to "Women Are Proud of Themselves"

The image of Mulan, born in folk literature, has developed together with the times, and the adaptation of movie works has made the culture of Mulan image complete the transformation from "textual language culture" to "audio-visual language culture", which further expands the influence of Mulan [9]. The evolution of Mulan's image in the East and the West is inevitable, but we can still see a unified vein - the continuous awakening of self-consciousness. It challenges the "gaze" from the outside world.

"Gazing" has been an important concept in Western literature and cultural criticism since the second half of the 20th century, which usually refers to the method of viewing that carries the operation of power, the entanglement of desires, and the sense of identity, in which the viewer is mostly the subject of "looking", but also the subject of power and the subject of desire. The viewer is mostly the subject of "seeing", but also the subject of power and desire; the viewed is mostly the object of "being seen", but also the object of power, the object of desire, and the object of desire [10]. In the academic context of feminism, vision is naturally gender-conscious. In the context of feminist scholarship, the visual is naturally gender-conscious, which is replaced by the native slang term, "women dress up for their beholders". The aesthetic orientation of human beings is determined by the classification, moralization, and philosophizing of the social system [11]. With the development of social productivity, people gradually left the matriarchal clan and stepped into the patriarchal clan. In the social environment of male power and patriarchal supremacy, the starting point for the

establishment of the ideological system was to consolidate the interests of the one with the most power, the male. Hence the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" elevate people's own status by suppressing the opposing sex. Over thousands of years of history, the idea of the inferiority or superiority of men and women has blended with orthodox thought, turning it into a leech hidden inside the human brain, eating away at the conscience and drawing sustenance from it. This is the case with women, who either passively or actively follow the commandment of "women dress up for their beholders" and become objects of male gaze.

5. Conclusion

Mulan, who was "a female who pleases herself", broke the ancient advice to women. Through the analysis of the theory of performance, multimodal discourse analysis theory, and comparing the image of Mulan in China's native illustrations and Disney movie posters, scholars can see a unified vein - the continuous awakening of self-awareness and the deepening evolution of feminism. The release of her nature and the manifestation of her personal interests are more important than rouge and powder. In the new version of the movie, after repelling the enemy, Mulan listens to her heart's call for "truth", takes the initiative to reveal her lies, and recovers her original daughter's body. In the movie, Hua Mulan, dressed in red, stands resolutely under the blue sky, with a penetrating gaze, as if saying again that I am a female, and that I am "glorified for myself"! However, the battle for women is not yet over. This study hereby may let contemporary youth know: for the bright future within reach, for the infinite distance, for the endless people, women should give full play to the advantages and influence of women's movies, and create their own gender discourse. Let all female compatriots in the world understand: a female can "please others", "please herself", and most importantly, women should be proud of themselves!

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