



The Reimagined Princess, The Empowered Female Warrior

A Comparative Analysis of *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan* (2020) Using the Fourth-Wave Feminist Framework

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Abstract. For nearly a century, the Walt Disney Company has been constructing the world-famous Princess Line and enjoying a lengthy reign of female-centred, female-targeted media productions. Relying upon a problematically androcentric formula, these princess fairy tales advocate stereotypical femininity and romanticise imbalanced heterosexual relationships. Nevertheless, as gender progressive ideas become increasingly popular and accepted in the 21st century, Disney’s princess fantasies face repeated criticism and elicit concerns among modern-day audiences. To alter such a negative reputation and reinforce its control over the media market, Disney turns its princess animations into live-action remakes and upgrades these classic stories and characters with feminist zeitgeists. Taken *Mulan* (1998) and its recent remake as the case study, this article identifies specific differences between the two princess protagonists and demonstrates that fourth-wave feminist discourses — the emphasis on choice, the construction of contemporary female ideals, and nuanced attitudes towards stereotypical masculinity — play a key role in reimagining *Mulan* into a more independent and empowered female warrior. This comparative textual analysis also examines particular flaws and biases contained in the fourth-wave feminist ideology, including the narrow definition of ‘aspirational women,’ the overemphasis on individual efforts, and the neglect of structural inequalities.

Keywords: Fourth-wave Feminism · Disney · Cultural Studies · Popular Cinema

1 Introduction

Ever since the #MeToo Movement developed into a global discussion and Donald Trump assumed the post of US President, a new wave of feminist ideologies has attained high levels of visibility in the mass media and been embraced by numerous women as “accessible, even admired” popular cultures (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 1). Differ from both second-wave feminists who focus on radically overturning structural barriers and conservative postfeminists who regard most feminist goals as achieved, the contemporary community tends to avoid the “angry, defiant, man-hating” stereotype while recognising the continuing gender crises experienced by women, such as low self-esteem, sexual

violence, and the glass ceiling in workplace (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 15). Replacing collective liberation with individual empowering discourses, these practitioners tap their central pursuits into neoliberal frameworks of professional achievements and personal capacity. Because of these characteristics, fourth-wave feminism appears as feel-good fads and corporate-friendly materials in daily conversations and occupies the media realm. As Rosalind Gill (2016, p. 614) declares, “Today it seems as if *everything* is a feminist issue.”

In response to this fervour, the film industry has seen an increase in gender-flipping and female reimagining reboots. Indeed, reproducing films with widely acknowledged reputations saves pre-production costs through recycling scripts and guarantees financial success by capitalising on viewers’ nostalgic fondness (Stenport and Traylor 2015; Rosewarne 2020). What matters more is that, as previous stories and characters become outdated or even problematic, remakes enable large Hollywood studios to repackaging their classics with up-to-date gender progressive values and thus maintain the staying power of these intellectual properties among younger generations. Old films are brought back on the big screen, featuring reconstructed female protagonists with superior intelligence, bravery, and confidence in order to satisfy 21st-century women’s desires for fairer gender depictions and more empowering female ideals (Braithwaite 2002; Gill 2016; Rosewarne 2020).

One media conglomerate that goes with this tide is the Walt Disney Company. As one of the most influential global cultural exporters, Disney has been sticking to a patriarchal idealisation of femininity and binding such biased gender depictions with the ‘happily ever after’ princess fantasy for almost 90 years. As the general sensitivity and understanding about gender (in)equality raises along with waves of feminist movements, this androcentric view of feminine experiences and virtues elicits repeated criticism from feminist activists, gender scholars, and female celebrities, denouncing Disney for setting and disseminating narrow conceptions of what it means to be beautiful and happy (Henke et al. 1996; Seybold 2020). Contemporary mothers have become increasingly sceptical about the influence of Disney princesses on their daughters, and fewer young audiences today dream of becoming these “passive, soft-spoken sweethearts” like girls decades before (Seybold 2020, p. 70). To change this reputation and make the Princess Line palatable again, Disney introduces new princess animated films and produces live-action remakes to amend previous characters. *Mulan* (2020), one recent example in the latter category, updates its 1998 animated musical into a fantasy action blockbuster with a clear feminist note. It is not so surprising that the company planned this reproduction as early as 2015, since *Mulan* is often praised as the most physically and mentally strong Disney princess. In 2018, a female-intensive team comprised of Niki Caro, the first female director of princess live-actions, and multiple established Chinese actresses, including Liu Yifei, Gong Li, and Cheng Pei-Pei, was announced, revealing Disney’s ambition to make an empowering story for this warrior princess.

However, as this high-profile remake eventually hit the screen amidst the pandemic, viewers' feedback polarised quite obviously on its revised plot and feminist pattern.¹ Manohla Dargis (2020), the film critic for *The New York Times*, appreciates the remake for portraying Mulan's military career in detail and adding multiple action sequences to show her strength and physical capacity. On the contrary, the film is criticised for adopting a superficial 'empowering' approach without revealing Mulan's internal struggles as a Chinese female warrior who faces a complex of patriarchal constraints, including filial piety, family honour, and gender inequality (e.g., Lawson 2020; Rivera 2020). These varying voices ignite my interest in conducting a comparative analysis of *Mulan* (1998) and its 2020 live-action remake as well as exploring how fourth-wave feminist discourses are employed to make this classic story different.

This paper starts with a review of Disney's Princess Line, which disseminates bluntly discriminatory patriarchal idealisations of femininity and feeds children unrealistic expectations for gender and heterosexual romance. This section also identifies the company's recent transformations achieved through harnessing popular feminist rhetoric, such as girls' power and individualism, in new princess animated films and live-action remakes (Genz 2009; Walters 2017). After summarising previous literature, the paper narrows down the research scope to compare and interpret two *Mulans*, produced 22 years apart in vastly different socio-cultural contexts. This comparative textual analysis methodology is intended to both connect and differentiate the contemporary remake from its animated origin, as well as to examine the influences of the feminist zeitgeist on these productions. How does *Mulan* (2020) construct the female protagonist differently? What characteristics does this renewed warrior princess have? How do these changes reflect the ideologies of fourth-wave feminism? This paper seeks concrete and identifiable answers to these research questions by comparing and interpreting the two films.

2 The Disney Formula: Princesses, Gender Roles, and Waves of Feminism

Cultural studies scholars identify that popular cultures often function as pervasive and persuasive storytelling agents, delivering encoded visual information for the public to perceive racial, gender, sexual, and other societal norms (Hay 1989; Hall 1997; Chan 2002). Gender schema theory further reveals that sex-typed representations, widely and repetitively disseminated in mass media, are likely to be internalised by audiences, especially at their young ages, as implanted cognitive structures of gender and sexuality (Swidler 1986; Schiele et al. 2020). With a "quasi-monopolistic position" over popular youth cultures, the Walt Disney Company has exerted powerful influences upon generations of people through producing family-oriented cartoons and animated films that

¹ **NOTES:** It is necessary to admit that such mixed reviews are influenced by factors other than the remake's feminist stand as well. For example, the main actress, Liu Yifei, openly supports Hong Kong police against pro-democracy protesters. The film is also criticised for crediting eight government bodies in Xinjiang province (its shooting location) where millions of Uighur Muslims have been forced into concentration camps. However, due to the article's focus on feminism, these political controversies will not be further discussed.

deliver specific morality, values, and lifestyles (Harrington 2015; Wilis 2017, p. 5). In recent decades, its messages that propagate conservative gender, racial and class images have encountered increasing criticism. Feminists and scholars frequently reproach this media giant for initiating children and teenagers into ‘Disneyfied’ heterosexual romance and retrograde gender views (Yin 2011; Key 2015; Seybold 2020). Among all its works, the Princess Line, which includes 14 characters so far, serves as the most famous and successful franchise that flaunts the hegemonic idealisation of female images. This “lengthy reign of the princess productions” can be classified into three stages, revealing constant interactions between conservative gender representations and changing feminist ideologies behind these princess stories (Stover 2013, p. 2; Menise 2019).

In the first stage (1937-the 1960s), Disney aimed to portray quasi-religious womanhood and uphold Anglo-American family values in a child-friendly and delightful tone. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* hit the screen in 1937 to appease the domestic anxiety and collective pressures after the Great Depression. The plot, centred around an adorable young princess, prioritises traditional familial morality from a white, capitalistic mainstream view and preaches the logic that women with ideal gender traits, such as glamour, kindness, domesticity, and naivety, can be saved by a charming prince and enjoy a happily-ever-after life (Wilis 2017). This film also sets the male-determined, unrealistic beauty standards that prevail until today: appealing women are those who have doe eyes, fair skin, shimmering hair, a tiny waist, and slender legs (Menise 2019). Further reinforced by *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Disney’s princess formula repetitively emphasises this ‘good girl’ image as well as the narrative trope that well-behaved princesses are rewarded by praises, recognitions, and romantic promises of princes and other male characters. The so-called “Cinderella Complex” (Dubino 2004, p. 103) and “love at first sight” (Ta 2018, p. 40) hoodwink young women, preparing them with unrealistic expectations for men and heterosexual relationships. What is more, these animated films depict genders in a binary framework. Female characters are always vulnerable, passive, nurturing, emotional and indecisive, in contrast to intelligent, forceful, dominant, and masculine men (Lazar 2014; Vieregge 2020; Seybold 2020). Such old images of glorified femininity entice girls to play the predefined role and remain submissive to male initiatives, chaining them in their prison-like houses with princess fairy tales and carefree family fantasies (Friedan 1963). Overall, taken as ideal female prototypes by countless girls, classic princesses glorify women’s conformity towards standardised beauty and familial devotion as well as uphold marriages as the ultimate mechanism to bring women promising lives.

Thirty years after the release of *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney resumed its princess series. However, the socio-cultural complexities at that time had been significantly shaped by second-wave feminism. Starting from the 1960s, progressive feminist debates on sexuality, reproduction rights, family roles, and legalistic inequalities justified women’s dissatisfactions with their stifling domestic responsibilities and led to collective protests against patriarchal institutions and hegemonic gender cultures (Genz 2009; Yin 2011; Lazar 2014). To keep up with the spirit of the time, the company adjusted its previous princess formula and stepped into the Renaissance stage (1989–1998). Compared to former characters prone to endurance and compliance, the Renaissance princesses – Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan – appear quite audacious and ambitious

at first glance, due to their rebellious spirits against traditional gender boundaries (Wilis 2017; Seybold 2020). For example, Ariel sometimes disobeys her father's order and loves to take adventures in the human world; Pocahontas plays an active role in negotiating with White American colonists and protecting her tribe; Mulan takes her aged father's place in the army and becomes an honourable female warrior. No longer dolls confined within their houses, Renaissance princesses reveal independent wills, curiosities to the outside world, and capabilities of fighting for individual goals.

In spite of such progress, princess animated films at this stage still cling to the cliché happy ending: eventually, the Prince Charming is found so that a presumably ideal marriage can be guaranteed (Schiele et al. 2020). In other words, after princesses show their potential and complete one transcendent task, there should always be a *twist* for them to get married and return to domesticity to obtain life-long happiness and fulfilment. The “princess-needs-prince” logic can still be identified in Renaissance princess stories, where the initially strong women either willingly make sacrifices for their true loves or fall in love with men who rescue them from predicaments (Grabedian 2014, p. 23). Disney continued to advocate conservative family values and sugarcoat unequal power relationships between men and women with fabricated heterosexual romance.

After repetitive iterations of radical progress and conservative backlashes, fourth-wave feminism arrived in the early 2010s and quickly swept across the globe. Named “popular feminists” by Banet-Weiser (2018, p. xii), these new participants intentionally eschew the spoilsport reputation of their predecessors, promoting feminism as an uplifting attitude and pleasurable lifestyle within more inclusive and diverse female communities (McRobbie 2004). Recognising the fact that gender inequalities and disadvantages still exist (which differentiates it from the postfeminist trend), the fourth wave shifts the main battlefield from pursuing structural changes to fixing individual problems, such as the lack of female participation in professional fields and anxiety about appearances (Chamberlain 2017; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). They also propose personal-based and self-reliant solutions, motivating contemporary girls and women to be empowered, make independent choices, *lean in* and believe in themselves (Rivers 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018). These safe and likeable talks grant ongoing feminism a corporate- and media-friendly position. As a result, commercials, popular cultural productions, and social media discourses frequently invoke relevant ideas and circulate new female representations, enabling the girl power politics to become more visible and fashionable.

For Disney, this burgeoning feminist fervour renders its long-established princess formula disturbing, unpalatable, and politically incorrect. For those “mothers who grew up with Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, who have daughters who listened to Madonna and Sinead O’Connor,” these princess animated films corrupt girls with patriarchal gender hierarchy and skewed female images (Warner 1994, p. 313). To revitalise the Princess Line and regain the female market, Disney actively channels popular feminist ideologies into its princess narrations. The Progressive stage (2009-present) introduces audiences to the most independent princess figures, such as the first African American entrepreneur Princess, Tiana, and the athletic archer Princess, Merida. They become braver, more self-assured, less reliant on men, and balanced-assertive with both traditional feminine kindness and masculine potency (Walters 2017; Ta 2018; Tasmin 2020).

Moreover, the live-action remake series is initiated in 2017 to repackage outdated stories and adapt the existing princess universe to current feminist politics. Central themes of fourth-wave feminism – girl power, confidence, female capacity, and mutually-respected romantic relationships – are incorporated into modified plots and aligned with the reborn princesses, advertising them as female role models who can inspire, liberate and empower both young girls and returning adult audiences.

In *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), for instance, the new Belle surprises the audience with her active attempt to escape from the Beast's castle and her inventor identity. Instead of witnessing a passive hostage obedient to masculine bestiality, contemporary viewers see a feisty heroine with passions and capabilities for reading, accomplishing outdoor tasks, and making real changes with her inventions (Barber 2017). Receiving positive comments as well, *Aladdin* (2019) endows Jasmine with access to education and underscores her interest in studying the Sultan's affairs and guarding Agrabah's citizens (Vieregge 2020). Simultaneously, this adapted version shows how the patriarchal hierarchy underestimates Jasmine's intelligence, denies her political status, and mutes her voice through a highly affective mode. When Jasmine sings the new solo "Speechless" with sheer exuberance and sincere feelings, she unleashes the hurts and frustration that women have long been suffering under this male-dominated system, as well as arouses hope, strength and determination to encourage and motivate them. These altered princess depictions prove the shaping force of fourth-wave feminism upon Disney and the company's firm decision to construct more empowering princess images to fit in with today's gender progressive climate.

3 The Comparative Analysis of *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan* (2020)

Both the animated film and live-action remake take the *Ballad of Mulan*, composed during the Northern Wei dynasty (around 400 AD), as their prototype. The *Ballad's* central plot – Mulan voluntarily takes her aged father's position and fights as a male warrior on the frontier – is kept in both productions, yet each contains some discrepancies, such as endowing Mulan with magic power or adding a spiritual animal as Mulan's company. Additionally, since the story originates in ancient China, Disney's cultural appropriation and inaccurate cross-cultural representations are debatable in both productions and have been criticised by many scholars. However, to narrow down the research scope and focus on the discussion about fourth-wave feminism, this essay does not probe into their deviations from the original work and representations of Chinese cultures. It is the productions' differences in depicting Mulan and the remake's incorporation of feminist ideologies that are demonstrated and further unpacked in the following sections.

Before diving into the textual analysis, some plot-based clarifications need to be made in advance. Firstly, the animated film gives Mulan a fake name, Hua Ping, in the army; while in the remake, Mulan continues to use her father's name, Hua Zhou. To avoid multi-name situations, "Mulan" will be used in most descriptions below, including the gender-disguise storyline. The second point is the new ethnicity of the invaders. Huns warriors led by Shan Yu in the animated film are switched to Rourans commanded by Bori Khan, but their vicious intentions of invading the imperial city and seizing the emperor's position remain the same. Apart from these trivial changes, there are

other modifications that affect the story development. The male protagonist Li Shang, who is both the Imperial troop captain and the prince-charming-like romantic partner for Mulan, is split into two male characters in the remake. The Imperial army leader, Commander Tung, is played by the middle-aged Hong Kong martial artist Donnie Yen, and Mulan's admirer Hong Hui, acted by Yoson An, is repositioned as her ally who lives, practises, and fights along her side. The remake also replaces the male-specific, friend-like dragon, Mushu, with a nonsexual, holy phoenix as Mulan's animal guard. This change significantly shapes Mulan's military experiences and her image as a female warrior, which will be expanded in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Empowerment Centred upon Gumption, Confidence and Choice

In the light of fourth-wave feminism, contemporary women are constantly prompted to dream big and have confidence so as to survive in the unequal system and build self-worth. Rivers (2017) and Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 73) point out that fourth-wave feminists "instruct young women that 'the power is in your hands'" as long as you choose to believe in yourself and reach for it. These empowering discourses are frequently framed as choices: individuals are obliged to make decisions that meet "socially valued versions" of progressive femininity in order to be accepted as progressive women (Boyd 2015; Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 30). The following section argues that these feminist emphasises – female gumption, confidence, and choice – are used as the logical framework to rationalise particular actions and psychological changes of the protagonist in *Mulan* (2020). Embodying these themes, the live-action version of Mulan is portrayed as a powerful 'new woman' who barely doubts her female potential and actively chooses to realise her ambition with her individual capabilities.

To deliver this choice-based empowering message, *Mulan* (2020) specifies the protagonist's motive for joining the army and her determination in becoming a competent warrior. Even though the original animated film portrays Mulan as a tomboyish girl who has trouble fitting into the obedient daughter/wife role, audiences never know her vision and dreams. Critics and scholars (see Yin 2011; Xu and Tian 2013; Tomicic 2020) claim that, in *Mulan* (1998), the protagonist's military career is a result of multiple external considerations rather than her internal impetus: a mixture of redeeming herself from the disastrous matchmaking, evading traditional female obligations of marriage, and fulfilling her filial piety by protecting her aged father. Therefore, she never regards being a female warrior as an honourable position that she is capable of and willing to achieve and constantly feels guilty, shameful, and regretful, especially when facing male authoritative figures. Even after defeating Shan Yu, she prepares to receive punishment with a lowered head and a deep frown in front of the emperor and, later, her father. Such passive and self-doubting attitudes severely weaken the feminist tone of this animated film, reinforcing Mulan's subjugated position within societal and family relations as well as implying the improperness and provisionality of women's participation and ambition in the professional field.

In contrast, the new Mulan regards guarding the kingdom as her pursuit since she was very young, and feels deeply honoured to shoulder the soldier's responsibility regardless of any physical or verbal threats. Through the expanded childhood story in *Mulan* (2020), audiences get familiar with this feisty girl who practises martial arts and dreams of

becoming a warrior. Indeed, when Mulan escapes from home and joins the troop, she hesitates about the correctness of such behaviours, conceals her female identity, and tries to hide her *chi*, a natural magic power that turns women into evil witches. Since she cannot summon up all her strengths, this disguise makes her a mediocre soldier in the troop and nearly takes her life in the first battle. This plot implies a classic real-world situation: girls are constantly asked to play the incapable part in schools and societies, hide their talents, and remain invisible at the cost of giving up their dreams and, even worse, losing the capability to protect themselves.

To underscore Mulan's confidence and deep faith, the remake quickly ends this self-deprecating and oscillating phase. When Xianniang, the shape-shifting witch, strikes Mulan's chest with an arrow and threatens that the troop can never accept women, she does not flinch but chooses to face the call of her heart, handle the gifted power, and return to the battlefield as a female warrior regardless of the potential repulsion. To further highlight this inner-driven determination, the remake replaces the passive disclosure of her femininity in *Mulan* (1998) with a self-determined make-over sequence.² When Mulan leaves the valley, the audience witnesses her holding the rein and unloading her armour on the horse's back. As the camera moves to the front, she strips off the iron corset that tightens her breasts and throws the helmet away, leaving her long hair fluttering in the air. This balanced image that spotlights both natural tenderness (the long hair and female body line) and empowered sturdiness (the red warrior uniform with a sword scabbard) not only differentiates Mulan from the Chinese feminine elegance and Disney's eroticised princess body, but also avoids an absolute surrender of her female identity. This sequence also develops the causation that Mulan attains a heroic aestheticism because she acknowledges and accepts her natural femininity as her best look.

Ever since this gender-revealing moment, Mulan never appears without this warrior costume, as well as her adamant belief. Even at her most vulnerable moment, exiled in the wilderness and attacked by Xianniang, Mulan is brave enough to defend her warrior esteem by holding the sword and firmly saying that "it is my place to fight for the kingdom and protect the emperor." Without denying, these narrative designs echo the fourth-wave feminist notions of empowerment and confidence. The remake delivers that Mulan can become a formidable warrior because she proudly accepts her femininity, believes in her capability and chooses to fight for her dream unwaveringly.

Interestingly, the juxtaposition of Mulan and Xianniang in the remake, two women who both possess special powers yet have drastically different fates, reflects a deeper logic of fourth-wave feminism: women must not only make choices but also make *the correct ones*. To be more specific, since Xianniang regards herself as a poor outcast and chooses to depend on the vicious Bori Khan, she is depicted as an evil goddess in most of the narration. As Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020) identify, current empowering notions held by fourth-wave feminists impose tremendous burdens upon individual women to rely on themselves and meet prescribed standards for so-called aspirational

² **NOTES:** In the animated film, Mulan's female identity is disclosed by the military doctor after she faints in the snow-mountain battle. Without an opportunity to defend herself, she is thrown out of the camp and expelled by Li Shang.

femininity without considering structural barriers and external environments that negatively affect some over others. Like Xianniang, those who “make the ‘wrong’ choices” are frequently vilified and reproached for being too weak, lacking self-discipline, counting on men, or having no faith (Boyd 2015, p. 104). Not until Xianniang recognises that the equal position she wants can never be granted by her man and chooses to protect Mulan from Khan’s arrow does she make the *proper* choice, which frees her from the trauma of being manipulated by men and transforms her into an empowering figure. The initial opposition between Mulan and Xianniang as well as the latter’s eventual sacrifice reveal the stressful and compelling nature of today’s choice-based feminist mandate that, instead of liberating contemporary women from stereotypical behaviours and beliefs, ends up restraining them within a new set of requirements epitomised by particular role models and ascribed as ‘properly feminine.’

3.2 The Powerful Individualism and Privileged Individuals

In depicting independent women with superior physical capabilities, *Mulan* (2020) is not a pioneer but follows a series of action films featuring female superheroes, fighters, and spies (e.g., *Max Mad: Fury Road* 2015; *Wonder Woman* 2017; *Atomic Blonde* 2017; *Anna* 2019; *Captain Marvel* 2019) that thrive along with the pervasion of fourth-wave feminism in mass media landscapes. Rejecting the stereotypical vulnerability attached to women and stepping into the field that is traditionally reserved for men, these female heroes impress the audience with extraordinary physical fitness, combating capability, and strong personalities, which they have long been regarded as lacking. Such a trend mirrors today’s feminist politics that centre on high-profile individuals and their individualistic achievements that “ha[ve] typically been understood as *masculine* success” (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 53). Moreover, fourth-wave feminism heavily relies on advocating the experiences and lifestyles of these successful women as the ‘feminist route’ for all whilst demanding emulation of their individualised attitudes and practices (Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017). For popular feminist thinkers, lady warriors on screen serve as empowered role models, from whom girls and women can learn to rely on their individual capacities, overcome inequalities and obstacles that exist in current contexts, and fight for personal accomplishments.

Similar to these female-led action films, *Mulan* (2020) adopts the hyper-individualising feminist trope and repackages the princess protagonist into a valiant fighter who possesses unprecedented martial arts capacity and barely needs help from her fellow soldiers. Though Mulan has long been seen as a powerful female warrior, this highly independent tone does not appear in the animated film. Contrarily, the original version admits Mulan’s average fighting ability while focusing on depicting her ingenious ploys. For example, in the iconic snow mountain battle, she aims the artillery at the mountain peak to cause an avalanche that swallows Chan Yu’s army rather than engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Due to her less muscular body, Mulan also depends heavily on teamwork and her male comrades’ protection, especially her secret crush, Captain Li Shang.

Two alterations are made in *Mulan* (2020) to reverse such stereotypical gender-power relationships and make Mulan into a more independent heroine. Firstly, the animal patron saint sent by the ancestors is changed from the clownish male dragon, Mushu, to a sacred

phoenix. In *Mulan* (1998), the male-specific Mushu teaches Mulan how to behave and communicate “like a man” when she first joins the troop. Such a taught gender performativity ties biological sexes with socially constructed views of femininity and masculinity, defining genders as a binary pair with taken-for-granted signifiers and normative prescriptions (Butler 1990). On the contrary, the sacred phoenix in the remake stands for gender-neutral strength and heroic immortality. According to Chinese mythology, the phoenix is an androgynous creature liberated from the traditional process of mating and reproduction, a holy bird that endures the burning fire to attain reincarnation. These cultural connotations represent the tough and independent characteristics of this new protagonist who never relies on men and becomes the first Disney princess without experiencing a romantic entanglement. What is more, the phoenix guardian endows Mulan with a sense of individual heroism. With its glamorous feathers and enormous wings, the phoenix often appears right behind Mulan in the fighting sequences, like a pair of godly wings stretched out for her. Such a sacred beauty and prestige differentiate Mulan from the crowd and elevate her as the fiercest fighter who overshadows other male warriors. It is reasonable to argue that this animal saint is selected purposefully to symbolise Mulan and echo the individualistic discourse emphasised by fourth-wave feminists, asserting that aspirational women should worry less about domestic constraints and make individual efforts to prove their values.

Secondly, to rationalise Mulan’s greatly enhanced fighting capability, the remake introduces the concept of *chi*, the vital power or energy that flows inside living creatures. With inborn *chi* and childhood martial arts training, Mulan reveals unprecedented physical competence as a little girl. In the later fighting sequences, intensive swooping shots, quick cuts, and complicated cinematographic movements are applied to amaze audiences with her extraordinary physique and close-combatting skills. In the final battle, all the male soldiers, including Commander Tung, cover her back, regarding Mulan as the best-trained warrior to single out Bori Khan and save the emperor. With this new superpower, Mulan is framed as a brave, forceful, capable, and empowered feminist role model upholding the heroic individualism. Her storyline refutes the long-lasting gender-based discrimination that downplays women as the weaker sex and discourages girls from pursuing careers that require high physical quality and athletic capacity. Her personal success becomes the perfect proof of ‘the girl power,’ prompting female audiences to exert individual capability and reach for their professional goals.

However, Mulan is not the only woman who has *chi* in the live-action remake. Xianniang impresses audiences as a mighty evil goddess with the formidable shape-shifting power in her introductory sequence. She squeezes Bori Khan’s throat with her claw-like hand and threatens him, “I can tear you into pieces before you blink.” A question then arises: since both Mulan and Xianniang have outstanding individual capacities, why is the latter, as she confides, condemned as the witch, expelled “like a scorned dog,” and has no choice but to depend on Bori Khan? My answer is that Mulan is not only a capable woman but also a greatly privileged one. Although the film does not provide too much background information about Xianniang, it is still reasonable to claim that Mulan enjoys multiple favourable conditions that Xianniang is deprived of. For example, the remake focuses on portraying her father’s crucial role in Mulan’s childhood. He allows her to practise martial arts like boys do and coaches her to wield

chi. More importantly, Mulan has learned from her father that people insult and wound women with *chi* because they could not understand this power and thus fear it. Thanks to these early warnings, Mulan never underestimates herself or loses hope as Xianniang does. Furthermore, the remake deliberately mentions her father's reputation in the army. In the training camp, Commander Tung mentions his old friendship with Mulan's father and invites her to have a family meal after the war. No doubt, this new information gives her privileges to some extent. In the animated film, Mulan experiences a heaven-to-earth difference after her real gender is disclosed. Li Shang refuses to give her an opportunity to explain and kicks her out of the troop as a guilty liar. Chi Fu, the timid advisor saved by Mulan, throws her into the snow and brutally scolds her as the "treacherous snake" with "ultimate dishonour." Contrarily, the remake adopts a much gentler tone and features this expulsion with a silent long shot. The audience witnesses Mulan turn around and, peacefully, leave the troop alone without hearing any exasperated accusation from the commander. Her identity as the daughter of a former warrior also explain why she can be accepted and trusted by the commander again after she returns to the troop with new military information. Suppose Mulan is not lucky enough to have these privileges. Can she still become such a forever-confident, steadfast, and independent female warrior? Or will she suffer the same agony and despair as Xianniang? My answer goes to the latter.

I further argue that this lack of in-depth discussion of Mulan's privilege and Xianniang's plight reveals the flaws included in the fourth-wave feminist ideologies of empowered individualism. Firstly, these discourses of confidence, girl power, and female success are almost always directed at 'the Mulans' – those "who are privileged enough to expect they are entitled" to these favourable traits and thus are capable of leaning in – but neglect the individual disparities within complex female communities (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 23). Such a focus on the ideal femininity eventually brings visibility to those who are already in the spotlight and take visibility as the end, as if seeing empowered woman figures leads to overall gender equality (Bent 2015; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020).

Moreover, by relieving institutions from the burdens of fixing gender issues and shifting the responsibility for seeking respect from the collective to individuals, the depoliticised attitude held by most fourth-wave feminists urges women to *just be confident* within existing contexts while overlooking the fact that it is the problematic structure that hinders many unprivileged girls from seeing their uniqueness and showing their capacity, no matter how hard they try. In the remake, Niki Caro plans to offer audiences an empowering ending, in which Mulan earns the recognition of the emperor and gets accepted into the army. However, it is unabashedly discouraging that the film leaves the discriminatory patriarchy system and the suppressing culture that stigmatises girls with *chi* in the first place unjudged and intact, leaving numerous girls like Xianniang in the same old, despairing trap. Following this fourth-wave feminist theme of individualism, the remake goes to great lengths to transform Mulan into a prototype of contemporary aspirational women. Nevertheless, its oversimplified plot sells confidence, persistence, and girl power as one-size-fits-all solutions for women to fight against gender stereotypes and confining societal norms. Such an idealised version of empowerment, in reverse, frustrates unprivileged female audiences who regard themselves as ordinary individuals and face far more complex and stronger systems of oppression in today's society.

3.3 Reconstructing a Less-Hypermale and More Inclusive Male Community

AS Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 3) illustrates, hegemonic masculinity and misogyny have long existed as norms “built into our structures, laws, policies and normative behaviour.” In film productions, hypermale practices and man-dominating sociality are often rendered invisible, as the default and the way things are. This observation is undeniably true for *Mulan* (1998), in which male characters are evaluated by their level of ‘stereotypical masculinity’ and placed within the classic gender-power hierarchy. Here, visible and performative traits of masculinity – muscular bodies, athletic physicality, aggression, and de-sentimentality – are associated with the male soldiers’ sexual attraction and elevated social position. During the practice sequence, Captain Li Shang is featured with a sculptured upper body and masterful combat skills to highlight his leadership and prestige, which override low-level soldiers. This equivalent set between masculine athleticism, or phallic potency (Mulvey 1975), and societal recognition can also be identified when the skinny soldier, Ping, fakes a muscular body shape with water inside his clothes to appeal to young women passing by. It is undeniable that the animated film shows an obvious favour for classic alpha males, rewarding hypermale with “unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance” (Gillam and Wooden 2010, p. 3).

Moreover, this animated film also treats male soldiers’ contempt for and repulsion of Mulan in an ambiguous or, even, tolerating way. As is described in the former section, Mulan is thrown into the snow, disdained and exiled after her female identity is disclosed. Before the kidnapping crisis takes place, all soldiers deliberately ignore Mulan, even though she keeps informing them of Shan Yu’s scheme. However, such misogynistic attitudes and emotional abuse are skated over and left uncriticised, as if their poignantly discriminated practices are automatically pardoned by the last-minute decision to reaccept Mulan into the troop. The film comes to a happy end when Mulan receives the emperor’s commendation, while leaving all her previous pains and sufferings behind as trivial matters.

Contrarily, *Mulan* (2020) depicts male characters in a much more nuanced manner against the backdrop of fourth-wave feminism and increasingly polarised gender discussions. As the time comes to the mid-2000s, the burgeoning popularity of feminism gradually brings a reactive trend of misogyny to the surface. As some furious men react to the increasing visibility of feminist ideologies, their toxic, narcissistic, and hypermale behaviours and discourses are put under the spotlight (Banet-Weiser 2015; Seybold 2020). Correspondingly, society has become incredibly concerned about depictions of both genders in mass media productions. On the one hand, we witness an increasing acceptance, even popularity, of un-macho heterosexual males, mainly expressed by female communities (Cobb 2015). On the other hand, more and more men, especially male celebrities, actively avoid “being the frontline troop of patriarchy” and admit their pro-feminist stance in public to prove their educated, open, and politically correct status (Cobb 2015, p. 137).

Following this trend, the live-action remake portrays a less aggressive and more inclusive male community. For example, when the soldiers discuss their ideal girls, Mulan denies the necessity of external beauty and praises girls with courage, intelligence, and a sense of humour. Whilst some soldiers laugh at her, Hong Hui reveals a light acquiescent smile to show his agreement. This detail delivers a more liberating and

feminist mindset, implying that not all men are aggressive, lecherous, and sexually hungry. To further separate the soldiers from hypermasculine and chauvinistic traits, the live-action remake portrays them as sentimental and humanistic subjects. Different from Captain Li Shang, who does not reveal any emotion after seeing his father's armour and countless corps on the battleground, the soldiers in the remake wear uncoverable shock, fear, and sorrow on their faces, which are further highlighted by multiple close-ups. Together with Mulan, they sit around the fire and confess their uneasiness and panic about the potential sacrifice. Instead of upholding the classic image of tough soldiers, the remake allows audiences to see the soft and emotional side of men. The shared reactions between male soldiers and Mulan also illustrate the feminist politics of equality (Cobb 2015), separating stereotypical characteristics from particular sexuality and undermining the binary system of gender.

Apart from that, the confining nature of patriarchal hierarchy is not only challenged by Mulan but also questioned by a traditionally authoritative power holder – Mulan's father – in this remake. In Disney's princess animated films, father figures almost always represent the heart of the family, privileged leadership, incontrovertible morality, and absolute control over people and property. As devoted executors of patriarchy, they are obliged to supervise the system and make sure that everybody is fixed in their 'prescribed' social positions. In *Mulan* (1998), Hua Zhou warns his unfitting daughter repeatedly to watch her manners and regards marriage as the only way for her to "uphold the family honour." The iconic warning, "I know my place, and it's time to know yours," reveals his inherent authority in suffocating Mulan's individuality, muting her voice, and restricting her within the domestic sphere as an inferior appendage.

In opposition, audiences see a more loving and comprehensive Hua Zhou in the 2020 version. The film introduces him through young Mulan's martial arts practice sequence, as the mentor who equips her with self-protecting skills and dream-pursuing capacities. His emotional entanglements with her unique daughter — perplexing, worried, sorrowful, and helpless — are frequently revealed throughout the film and eventually confided in audiences:

"If you have such a daughter, will you tell? ... Could you tell her only son could wield of *chi*, that a girl would risk shame, dishonour, exile? Ancestors, I could not."

Here, the original patriarchal authority symbol is transformed into a feminist supporter who disapproves of the imprisoning gender roles and male-dominating discrimination. As the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron says, "daughters should have the same opportunities as son[s]." Such paternal sympathy for women experiencing societal confinements clearly differs from the conservative stance of male authorities in *Mulan* (1998) and reflects new gender ideologies under the fourth-wave feminist climate (Schiele et al. 2020; Yin 2011). Following this fresh feminist proposition, the remake not only targets women but also interpellates male audiences with fatherly affects. Like most fourth-wave feminist thinkers suggest, the remake demonstrates that today's gender principles and productions should not be merely regarded as a 'female thing' but must adapt to the mixed-gender public discourse and invite men to play supporting roles (Brode 2005).

4 Closing Remarks

The comparative analysis of two *Mulan* productions indicates that the cinematic representation of this female protagonist has, indeed, changed. In the live-action remake, Mulan no longer appears as a classic Disneyfied princess but impresses contemporary audiences as a capable, steadfast, independent and empowering female warrior. By specifying Mulan's self-determination, portraying her autonomy, and strengthening her supernatural competence, the live-action remake constructs a 'new woman' image that perfectly represents multiple fourth-wave feminist ideas.

Compared to her externally motivated, constantly bewildered, and more subordinate predecessor, the new Mulan clearly expresses her professional ambition of being a warrior and actively upholds confidence and self-recognition. In other words, females' freedom and autonomy are expressed through the new Mulan's choice of pursuing her goals, believing in herself, and neglecting external denials. Moreover, additional superpowers – the *chi* and the holy phoenix – endow Mulan with the image of an aspirational female role model. Such emphasis upon her physical competence differs from the original animated version and resembles more recent female-led action films, dismantling the long-held prejudice towards women and championing individual successes as inspiring paradigms. The article also illustrates that the remake replaces the hypermasculine and misogynist soldier community with more inclusive and understanding male characters. All these adaptations are inextricably interlaced with fourth-wave feminist themes and popular feminist phenomena, such as the endorsement of gumption, emphasis on choice, the establishment of individual female ideals, rising attention to misogyny, and increasingly nuanced discourses for both genders.

Nevertheless, the paper points out that *Mulan* (2020) is not an unimpeachable production for redefining female presentations on screen. In the comparative analysis, multiple problems of this new princess story are identified and expanded upon to reveal their close associations with the drawbacks that reside in fourth-wave feminist discourses. For one thing, the comparison formed by Mulan and Xianniang reinforces the problematic logic: in order to be included in the feminist camp, women must make the right choices and enact the acceptable versions of femininity. Those who fail to do so are constantly stigmatised and criticised for their self-renunciation. Similar to most popular feminist arguments, the remake avoids commenting upon structural inequalities while exerts heavy pressures upon individual women to engage in feminist practices and exercise strict self-discipline. Moreover, Mulan's magical power and beneficial family environment give her privileges and make her success unreplicable. These ideal conditions constantly frame Mulan as *the chosen one*, making it difficult for audiences to project themselves into the story and undermining the remake's empowering messages. This fairytale-like, legendary plot reveals how fourth-wave feminism overlooks asymmetries of power in the current society that favour a specific group of women and advocates particular female ideals who, in fact, enjoy exclusive rights. Such drawbacks make both the film and neoliberal feminist discourses exclusive and discouraging for those who have difficulties or are unwilling to emulate the admirable, progressive, and successful feminist prototype.

To conclude, *Mulan* (2020) has made great efforts to reconstruct a strong, independent, and empowering female warrior princess by enthusiastically embracing and

leveraging recent gender progressive notions. However, its remaining flaws reflect some superficialities and biases that appear in fourth-wave feminist theories. It is reasonable to argue that such female-centric remakes have become and will continuously exist as a popular style for the film industry to satisfy the needs of contemporary female audiences and capitalise on the burgeoning feminist trend. For film scholars, the cultural messages and pedagogical influences of these pro-feminist media works are worth more research and investigation.

NOTES

orth more research and investigation.

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