

Fangyi Xu\*

# Transformation in Gender Narrative in the Context of Globalization – Study on the Screen Image of *Mulan*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jtc-2022-0013>

Published online October 27, 2022

**Abstract:** In the context of globalization, the Chinese story of *Mulan* has moved from China to the world, providing an important case for feminist film criticism. From the perspective of film narratives of female characters, intertextual narratives about *Mulan* reveal the neutral change in the female narratives from the male “gaze”, gender role anxiety and female self-awakening, transcending traditional gender role norms. From the perspective of the gender narrative of the role relationship in the movie, the gender role relationship shifts from implicit patriarchy to a new relationship involving equal dialogue between gender roles. The inner strength of the development of feminist films in the context of globalization is the result of the strong willingness of female directors who want to create narratives of independent women and audiences who desire new images of independent women.

**Keywords:** feminist film theory, gender narrative, implicit patriarchy

## 1 Introduction

The story of *Hua Mulan* originated in China and reflects Chinese gender culture. *The Ballad of Mulan*, a folk song from the Northern Dynasties, talks about the relationship between country and family through a story in which a daughter disguises her gender so that she can serve in the military in place of her father. This story has been constantly adapted in the process of globalization and endowed with new gender cultural significance in the change of modern ideas.

In 1928, the image of *Hua Mulan* first appeared on the screen in a silent film directed by Yao Hou. In 1939, *Mulan Joins the Army*, produced by Hwa Cheng Studio, was well received. In 1956, China Changchun Film Studio produced the film *Mulan* (Henan opera version), whose libretto was widely circulated. In the context

---

**\*Corresponding author: Fangyi Xu**, Communication University of China, Beijing, China,  
E-mail: xfyacademic@163.com

of globalization, in 1998, Disney released the animated film, allowing the story of *Mulan* to circulate worldwide. In 2009, a film studio produced a film of the same name. In 2020, Disney released a live-action version of the film, using the same title. The remakes and rebirth of the image of *Mulan* in cinema reveals the transformation of women's role and gender relations in different eras and different cultural backgrounds. From a narrative point of view, "because movies as a form of art are narratives centered on 'people', the 'external' and 'internal' worlds of people exactly constitute the core content of films. The so-called 'external' world refers to the manifestation of human behaviors, i.e., the content of the social activities that people engage in, while the so-called 'internal' world refers to the content of human potential psychological activities .... The reality reflected in the narrative contains the internal and external worlds of the people" (Tan, 1984). How are the internal and external worlds of *Mulan*, as a "person," a "woman," a "hero" or a "heroine," portrayed? The cultural dilemma here is how women can transcend their existence as a mirror image of men. How can *Mulan* exist as a woman or a person? In the context of globalization, a comparative analysis of the symbolic meaning of *Mulan*'s image from changes in female narratives is helpful for examining the process through which feminist narratives are generated from the perspective of cultural history.

## 2 Feminist Film Theory and Issues Related to Gender Studies

In 1975, Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, in her seminal text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", categorized film narrative analysis into three types of "gazes": the gaze of the camera, the gaze between the characters and the gaze of the audience. These three types of gazes are consistent with the gaze of men towards women. Mainstream movies treat male concepts favorably through narratives and scenes while producing and reproducing the cultural tradition of patriarchy. This dualistic structure reflects the unbalanced power relations operating in reality. Female viewers identify with either the active male role or the sacrificed heroine (Mulvey, 1975). In the 1970s, Mulvey adopted the dualistic gender concept when discussing the essence of visual pleasure, i.e., the film's producers, the characters in the story and the gaze of the audience together shape men as the subject of the narrative and women as the passive object that is defined, watched and gazed upon by men. In the narrative of a patriarchal culture, men are drivers, and women passengers; the visual pleasure of a movie reproduces a structure through which men are viewing and women are viewed. This argument

has been questioned because of its strong patriarchal determinism, and Mulvey herself could not deny her criticism of the patriarchal culture in film. In 1989, Mulvey reflected on her own views and realized that she should have paid attention to two important issues: the change in the plot itself and the audience's situation (Mulvey, 1989).

Jinhua Dai's film criticism addresses the "female theme" issue in film narratives. She argues that "although the history and civilization of China and the world are full of superficial female representations and discourse about women, the permanent absence of the true identity and discourse of women is 'present' ... The plight of women steps from the prisons of language and norms, the difficulty of self-identification and the siege and confusion of mirages" (Dai, 2004). How women are portrayed on the screen, which has been controlled by men, has become an important issue. Although it is possible to break through male discourse to express the true existence of women, this true existence is not pure or essentialist. In other words, the visual pleasure of cinema is not only the gaze of the camera, the gaze between the characters and the gaze of the audience but is also dependent on the subject of the narration and subject to language difficulties. How can women's real life be expressed?

This paper examines the changes in the female narratives in different "Mulan" films based on the changes in filmmaker, gender role relations in the text and on screen, and the audience since the 1980s. From Chinese female narratives to cross-cultural female narratives, the multifaceted, flexible and reactive female identities and narratives have replaced traditional single and passive female identities and narratives that are merely mirror images of men, with important cultural goals of breaking through the traditional narrative mode that "women" can only be relevant when connected with "men" and striving to open up a women-based narrative by removing the shackles of gender stereotypes and breaking traditional dualistic gender separation. The innovations and practices of film narratives are associated with women subverting, flipping and undermining the very possibilities of the male gaze.

### **3 Globalization and the Changes of Gender Significance in Mulan's Narratives**

Mulan, as a representative story about women or female characters, has been popular since the 1980s, and its intertextuality has been formed from multiple film versions, providing bases for discussions on how women's stories, with Mulan as the template, are narrated in different stages of globalization, from which we can

adopt the evolution of gender narrative. These issues are addressed by postmodern feminist film theories: “Who is making the film? For whom? Who is watching the film? And who is speaking for the film?” (Chaudhuri, 2006)

### 3.1 Before Going Global, Mulan as a Man: A De-gendered Image of Chinese Women’s Liberation

The original text of *The Ballad of Mulan* tells the story of Mulan, who, as a woman, left her home, endured humiliation, fought alone, and finally completed military service, returning home with glory and asking, “who can tell if I am a man or a woman?”, ultimately winning the respect and recognition of her people. In the original text, because “Father has no grownup sons, and I have no elder brothers,” Mulan must disguise herself as a man to enlist in the army in place of her father to fulfill his duty to his family and the state.

Jinhua Dai argues that in the history of Chinese culture, women have always faced two images and two dilemmas: *Hua Mulan* and *Qin Xianglian*. The image of *Hua Mulan* represents the cosmetic modification of women in the public sphere, where women have to pretend to be a man in order to gain social status, and image of *Qin Xianglian* represents women’s traditional role in the private sphere, where they must wait patiently for recognition by society (Dai, 2007). Cross-dressing by women signifies the need, in the public sphere, to be like a man. The symbolic meaning is that in order to be successful, women must be like men and be heroic, able to tackle any challenge. Modern female intellectuals, such as *Qiu Jin* and *Tang Qunying*, referred to *Mulan* as a heroine and regarded her as a role model (Xia, 1995). The term “female hero” (Ying Ci) has not been retained in modern Chinese language, making the word heroine have a more symbolic meaning.

In the carry-over of Chinese culture, although “cross-dressed”, *Mulan* still faces challenges related to marriage and family and to women’s traditional roles. In 1924, the Minxin Film Company made the movie *Mulan Joins the Army*, which was based on the famous Beijing Opera of the same name performed by Mei Lanfang in 1912. In 1927 and 1928, Pingqian Li and Yao Hou, famous directors during the silent film era in China, directed *Hua Mulan Joins the Army* and *Mulan Joins the Army*, respectively. In 1939, Hwa Cheng Studio and Meishang China United Pictures remade *Mulan Joins the Army*. At the end of these movies, *Mulan* always retires and returns to her home, changes back into women’s clothing, and marries *Yuandu Liu*. Furthermore, *Mulan* cross-dressing as a man addresses the relationship between family and country. *Mulan Joins the Army*, by Wancang Bu, presented the dilemma of “loyalty” and “filial piety” during the “Solitary Island” period in Shanghai, in which the meaning of “loyalty” in *Mulan*’s military service

was transformed into the modern nation-state identity that men must exhibit patriotism.

In 1951, Xiangyu Chang, the master of Henan opera, donated a “Xiangyu Jushe” fighter jet to the army during the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, mainly using proceeds from portraying “Mulan” in her charity performances. In October 1956, Changchun Film Studio made an opera film from Chang Xiangyu’s Henan opera show. In the movie, taking off her uniform, Mulan meets with the marshal and tells him how she joined the army, and the marshal praises Mulan for being a heroine. Since then, Mulan has been revered as a symbol of a “heroine.” In the aria of Big Brother Liu’s View is Too Biased, Chang expresses the pride women had in their own abilities in the early days of socialism while criticizing the collective unconsciousness of “women are inferior to men” that is based on men’s discourse (Liu & Zhang, 1956).

Who says women are always enjoying their leisure,  
while men are fighting on the border?  
Women are weaving at home,  
farming during the day,  
weaving at night,  
They work hard day and night,  
so soldiers and generals have food to eat and clothes to wear.  
Many heroines also contribute;  
they kill the enemy for the country,  
as elite warriors in generation after generation.  
How can you say women are inferior to men?!

In 1961, in the theme song of the movie *The Red Detachment of Women*, Hua Mulan’s image is portrayed as follows: “In ancient times, Hua Mulan served in the army for his father; today, there is a Red Detachment of Women who fight for the people. Communism is the truth, and the Communist Party of China leads the way. Women want liberation, women want liberation.” The image of Mulan has become a representative of women’s liberation.

Such an image of Mulan follows what Jinhua Dai calls the “Mulan Road”, i.e., becoming a man and a “hero”; therefore, women’s liberation is limited to “just like a man”, and “de-genderization” means “de-feminization”. This narrative of women is consistent with the women’s liberation movement advocated after 1949

China. The ideal woman in this narrative becomes an omnipotent heroine, whose heroic temperament is manly. This leads to a Chinese-style family and country isomorphism, in which both men and women are loyal and are selflessly dedicated to family and country, continuing the cultural imagination and aesthetic tendency of national patriarchy.

### 3.2 *Mulan* Going Global: An Image of a Heroine with Gender Role Anxiety

In 1998, Disney released the animated feature film (Cook & Bancroft, 1998), allowing this Chinese story to be told worldwide. This film presented the first Chinese heroine in the history of Hollywood and Disney animation; however, the story of *Mulan*'s military service was revised extensively in terms of characters and narratives. The otherized image of *Mulan* has dual meanings. One is a Chinese beauty with an amber skin complexion and almond-shaped eyes like a phoenix, and the other is a light-hearted approach to address complex gender identity issues, i.e., heavy makeup during a blind date, discomfort with women's traditional identity, and inconvenience of serving in the army. The fairy-tale *Mulan* image that was presented to the world was a "cross-dressing" heroine with anxiety regarding her gender identity, the values of personal struggle advocate Western individualism.

The female narratives of the animated film *Mulan* still conform to the narrative conventions of Disney princess stories, exhibiting features of patriarchy. The image of Hua *Mulan* is absolutely feminine. Wearing women's clothing or men's clothing, the protagonist has feminine features, with big eyes, thick lips, gentle movements, and self-doubt. She needs and waits for the affirmation of others and uses her feminine features to gain men's attention. In the fairy-tale narrative, the heroine discovers the peculiarity of her own identity, and her growth is a journey of adventure. In the end, she affirms and believes in her identity and mission, defeats the villain, and wins the love of a hero. Notably, the anxiety regarding women's identity is addressed in a romantic way, through Song Dynasty lyrics and dancing rather than a rational discussion of the source and continuation of women's repression. This type of female narrative follows the traditional needs of the audience in the United States and the idealistic utopian story that is culturally harmonious, with a happy ending, and can be enjoyed by the whole family. Inconveniences experienced by the heroine in the barracks, e.g., difficulty in taking a bath and rude and obnoxious behavior by her male comrades, are comically exaggerated. These scenes, such as foolishness during a blind date, heavy makeup, and an ill-fitting uniform, show the confusion, trouble, hardship,

and resistance to female identity in a patriarchal society in a humorous and light-hearted way but cannot abolish gender stereotypes. During the Reflection scene, during which the famous song is heard, Mulan is removing her heavy makeup to reveal her true face but is still wearing some makeup (i.e., a female label), and both the music and the picture highlight the contradiction between gender and identity.

In 2009, the Chinese film *Mulan* was released, with an all-star cast. This film basically follows the story of Hua Mulan joining the army on behalf of her father but also focuses on Hua Mulan's love story, depicting depression and sadness in her life. The dual identities of Hua Mulan as a "woman" and "hero" are contradictions. The "hero" identity must move forward without fear while the "woman" identity hesitates for love. This contradiction has long become a narrative element of commercial films, replacing gender identity conflict with a westernized independent female image while relaying the gender conflict and tragedy of women in terms of career development and emotions.

### 3.3 The Image of Mulan in the 2020 Live-Action Film: A Neutralized Hero as the Subject

In 2020, after 20 years of ideological construction, audience development and in the context of the global "MeToo" campaign, Disney produced a new live-action film, *Mulan*, in which the story of Mulan as the heroine was revisited. The movie, directed by Niki Caro, a female director, is a feminist declaration, emphasizing the heroine's self-consciousness and self-definition of success. In this latest film, the spirit of individualism and the equality demanded by Mulan, i.e., "Mulan is her own captain", transcended the traditional imagination of the binary division of the genders.

The image of Mulan in the 2020 live-action film seeks to eliminate implicit patriarchy and create a narrative and aesthetic of women's self-growth, making Mulan a "person" or even a neutralized person. *Mulan* was played by Yifei Liu. The feminine appearances of traditional Mulan, e.g., big eyes and thick red lips, are downplayed, and the phoenix eyes full of oriental temperament, were restored. Lip makeup was decreased so that the pure femininity distinguishing Mulan from men was no longer highlighted. Additionally, Mulan was not transformed into a fake "male soldier". The prominent cheekbones of the actor had a visual impact, giving the impression that Mulan could overcome difficulties with her own personality and fear no challenges. This aesthetic is neutral and transcends gender, representing a screen image that evolved from the awakening of female consciousness to the call for equal rights and then to independence, so that Mulan is not defined

by gender but by personality. Herein, this is called the neutral aesthetic orientation or gender-transcending aesthetic orientation. The image of Hua Mulan in a red dress and long hair is elegant in a self-serving manner. *Mulan*, played by *Yifei Liu*, wields a long sword on the battlefield, without using armor to conceal her original feminine characteristics. In other words, she “does not fight like a male soldier”. Additionally, the movie also breaks down the conventional perception of women in traditional culture, i.e., Mulan “does not behave like a woman”. In the movie, she uses her personal abilities to demonstrate her personal charm.

Looking back at the cultural history of Mulan’s image, it is not difficult to see changes in the narrative of the gender role in Mulan’s image, changes that are related to the understanding of female roles in the culture of the times. The image of Mulan in China and around the world has become a powerful tool for feminism in Chinese culture, creating a new image that transcends the traditional identity of women, and the change in Mulan’s image reveals a transition from the image of women’s liberation in local culture to that of women’s liberation in transnational feminist films. It embodies the imagination of other cultures in the global context while exploring various possibilities of the image of women’s liberation. The image of Mulan in the 2020 film has broken gender stereotypes. The image of Hua Mulan as a hero has both feminine beauty (e.g., long hair, red clothes (no longer black, white and gray), and bright eyes) and masculinity (e.g., fighting, sword fighting, archery, etc.), without the feminine charm or manly roughness purely belonging to gender stereotypes. Her heart is also delicate though she is courageous and fearless. The characteristics of masculinity and femininity stipulated by the patriarchal cultural hegemony are so obscured and integrated that Mulan is no longer bound by certain regulations. The neutral beauty reflects her unique personality that has transcended gender and identity.

## **4 Changes in Mulan’s Narrative of Gender Relations: Getting Rid of Implicit Patriarchy**

### **4.1 The Restriction of “Implicit Patriarchy” on Female Images**

In the Chinese Mulan narratives before 1989, the gender relationship was relatively simple and focused more on Mulan’s family-state relationship. However, in the context of globalization, the narrative of gender relations in Mulan’s role has developed into an aesthetic logic addressing “implicit patriarchy”, a glass ceiling in contemporary film and television productions, representing the deep-rooted penetration of mainstream patriarchal culture in literary works as well as the



implicit values that are the least noticeable by the audience when receiving the content. Implicit patriarchy is portrayed in two ways. On the one hand, there exists one or a series of male characters with vision or an actual leader, mentor or friend with a status above the highest goal, greatest value and highest position achievable by women and whose capabilities and ideological and value far surpass that of female characters, making them, essentially, oppressors. Sometimes, such male characters are just illusory spiritual idol that represents a powerful and insurmountable male power and discourse. The female character's life journey and lifelong pursuit seem to be recognized and judged by these male characters. On the other hand, although some film and television productions do not use such an image, the regulations that female character's follow are all rules stipulated in the patriarchal system, in which the ideal image of a woman is stereotyped as gentle and virtuous and successful for a woman involves finding love, otherwise being consumed by "loneliness". In Disney's animated film *Cook and Bancroft* (1998) and the Chinese commercial film *Mulan* (2009), the protagonist's love story is an important side story that accompanies the main story and becomes a decisive force through which the main storyline flows, determining the success of the characters (especially the heroine) in the main storyline.

In the animated film, Hua Mulan's love interest is her superior, and her growth trajectory is guided and influenced by this superior. The anxiety brought by the female identity to the protagonist is described through a discourse of warmth, humour and an inspirational fairy tale. Although Mulan is an image of an Asian heroine who dares to break with traditions, she still cannot elude the requirements of social and ethical regulations; under the oppression of patriarchy, it is very difficult for her to become an independent heroine. An "interesting sidekick" continuously guides the heroine in making decisions regarding major events and helps young women achieve "happy and passive" growth. Additionally, the male protagonist plays an important role in advancing the main storyline. With the blessing of the two male protagonists, Mulan achieves personal growth and falls in love.

In the Chinese commercial film, Hua Mulan has a crush on the male protagonist, i.e., *Wentai*, who is not only her love interest but also her superior, intensifying the conflict related to status differences. *Wentai* is the deputy commander of the battalion and discovers Mulan's identity but hides it. He appreciates Mulan's Kungfu skills and understands her emotional weaknesses, so he elaborately designs Mulan's personal growth. In the end, this love is forbidden, bringing about sadness, because of political marriages and the notion that family and country are important in Chinese culture. The fragility and affection experienced by Hua Mulan contrast the cruelty and ruthlessness of war and reality, i.e., the characters are made of flesh and blood and have emotions, while war

inhumanely tears at protagonist's heart. Such a setting is more in line with the characteristics of local commercial blockbusters at that time, i.e., a fixed type of war film that satisfies the production lineup and scale while having drama through a strong plot and character development. However, the conservative heroine narrative still presupposes that although the male antagonist is fighting side by side with Hua Mulan, he is superior to the female antagonist in spiritual growth and dramatic action, as a display of implicit patriarchal mentorship. In these two films, the growth of Mulan's image and character is developed under the dominance and support of a man who is a lover interest, superior and friend, and she has lost her autonomy and the motivation derived from her own spirit and ideals. In love and relationships between the genders, the male protagonist is superior to Mulan in terms of status, experience, knowledge and ability, and under the control of this relationship, Mulan is in a disadvantageous position from the beginning and has no equality in the love affair, reflecting a reality in which men dominate and women are inferior. Mulan's feelings are still a mixture of dependence, gratitude and worship.

## 4.2 Transcending Gender and Breaking Implicit Patriarchy

In the 2020 film *Mulan*, a new pattern of gender relations is presented, and the "sidekick" in the animated film is excluded. *General Tang*, a traditional male character, is retained as Hua Mulan's teacher, but the relationship between the characters and the narrative was changed. First, the heroine does not exchange learning for love. As a student, she strives for her own growth and does not want her teacher to do things for her. Second, the growth of Hua Mulan is relatively independent, and the heroine herself is in control of her own destiny, i.e., taking her father's place in the army, striving to climb through the ranks, defeating the enemy and winning respect. The heroine takes the initiative. Third, Hua Mulan transcends the stereotypes of gender. She is a kid with extraordinary talents, has been active since she was little. She has superior physical strength and agility to her peers and goals that are different from those of other girls, and she is eager to see the outside world. During her rigorous training, she is the first soldier to haul water to the mountain top, while her male comrades fail to do so. She does not use her female persuasion or have interest in love. In contrast, she uses her strength and will as a "person" and her talent and potential to reach the top, realizing that she can remove the shackles and learn about herself. Mulan, like the protagonists in other superhero movies, is inherently different and works very hard and is thus destined to succeed. The growth truly transcends gender and is no longer about gender differences.

The treatment and adaptation of the love storyline in *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) are also quite meaningful. On the one hand, the love storyline is minor and does not prompt the main story, only being used to inject warmth after the heroine accomplishes her mission. The narrative of the gender relationship between love and partner is no longer “the fire that melts the snow” but “the icing on the cake.” The adaptation of the male protagonist is simply a change in the character’s identity but creates a qualitative change in the theme of the film and the protagonist’s motivation for growth. In this film, Mulan’s love interest and superior are two different characters: *General Tang* and *Honghui Chen*. Under normal circumstances, commercial films merge redundant characters or assign more identities to a character to achieve high narrative efficiency, intensified conflicts and reduced production costs. However, the character differentiation clearly defines Mulan’s love interest; therefore, the love affair is no longer mixed with other relationships, i.e., reliance on other external characters or expectations of others, and the love affair is no longer entangled with the growing relationship, portraying a more independent image and personality. In this film, Mulan’s love story begins through a friendship that is spiritually equal due to similar age and life experiences. She and her love interest work together to fight against the enemy, appreciating and recognizing each other and ultimately falling in love with each other. In such an equal relationship, love is pure. The feminine image of Mulan is independent, active, and autonomous rather than being dependent and thus complements her independent growth. In the narrative of gender relations, the aesthetics changed. The heroine, described as an individual, relies on her will and hard work to independently complete and solve tasks, and the driving force is her own will and the active pursuit of inner desires and goals rather than others’ control. Mulan is a soldier, a fighter, a hero and a daughter but, more importantly, herself. As the subject of the narrative, Mulan is no longer subordinate or passive in her relationship with men. Driven by her inner desires and ideas, she proactively seeks to complete tasks and solve problems and, ultimately, achieves success through her independent efforts.

The character *Xianniang* (played by Gong Li) is a villain and a witch with magical power and is a female antagonist (Hollywood Reporter, 2019b). The image of *Xianniang* represents an effort to break the glass ceiling. *Xianniang* represents the experience of women with extraordinary talents in past eras. She has never been recognized, so she has to achieve self-realization through evil ways by relying on unscrupulous men. However, she is nothing but an instrument to the antagonist leader and is thus desperate because her only way of obtaining a sense of self has been cut off. However, she sees in Mulan the potential to break through the implicit patriarchy, and she sees that Mulan can do things that were impossible for her to achieve; therefore, she ultimately sides with Mulan, tips her off, inspires her to

fight, and finally dies protecting her. Mulan is fortunate; she represents a new generation of women who break the shackles of the external environment and realize their true selves. Implicit patriarchy cannot hide in this setting. Xianniang is the only female villain in many Mulan stories, and her role is set as an evil character. The symbolic meaning of Mulan facing Xianniang is the fight against not just patriarchy but also power and violence. With heroes and enemies at the same starting point, the heroes and characters in the enemy camps can be of any gender, transforming the conflict between the two parties from the one-dimensional oppression of women by men to the symbolic oppression of humanity by power and violence. By getting rid of the “female narrative is not a gender-flipped version of male narrative” cliché, women evade becoming the mirror image of “male characters”.

## 5 Female Voice and Cultural Power

Looking at the aesthetic changes in gender narratives regarding the relationships among characters, the inherent driving force is the ability of women to have a voice, which stems from the independent demands of female directors and female audiences.

### 5.1 Female Directors and Telling Women's Stories

The director's identity, especially the director's imagination of the audience, determines the director's gender narrative style. The 1998 animated film *Mulan* was directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Tony Bancroft once produced animated films, such as *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994), whose imagined audience was a harmonious family; therefore, he wanted to meet the needs of a family-style movie and a light comedy, and growth without fear of difficulties has become a constant theme of his movies. The appeal of this type of commercial film is to portray imagination in the comfort zone of the audience. For example, in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Princess Belle* loves to read and dares to love or hate. However, her independent personality does not change her fate of marrying a prince. Nevertheless, she has the courage to refuse a male charmer who she does not like, dares to rescue her father by herself, and falls in love with a beast that does not look like a prince but has a golden heart. All this still occurs in a carnival like setting in which the characters are dancing and have distinctive characteristics of the times and culture, representing who is telling stories and to whom.

In the Chinese commercial film *Mulan* (2009), Chucheng Ma, the director, implanted sentiment and modern ideas in the film. Chucheng Ma once said, “Frankly speaking, many girls go to the city from their hometowns, which can be viewed as Hua Mulan joining the army in place of her father. I used some modern ideas to update Hua Mulan from the old times. So, when the entire story was conceived, I started from this point, i.e., the modern ideas of Chinese women at present.” To the director, among modern women, “every woman needs love. Mulan is a person, and people need love to be happy. So, the best feature of Mulan is the love story. She has been away from home for 12 years, so you can figure out what father-daughter love is. I strived to tell a love story and found the real Mulan in my mind. The most profound feature of Mulan is her heart and open-mindedness. She is a person who cherishes friendship and loyalty very much.” On the imagined audience, he said: “This film has a broad audience. If we produce ‘Hua Mulan’ from a female perspective, the investors could complain that the movie is nothing but a tearjerker. Therefore, the movie should target all movie-goers. It is mainly for a female audience but will not bore a male audience” (Sina Entertainment, 2009). Here, “who is telling the story and to whom” is an important issue. The narrative has been changed. Previously, the rulers of the patriarchal culture tell the story to the followers of patriarchal culture, but now, the rulers of the patriarchal culture tell the story to all people, and the audience has dubious expectations for the establishment of new female images but no other expectations; the meaning of love and affection to people has replaced the meaning of female growth to women.

However, as reported by the Hollywood Reporter (2019a), Niki Caro, the director of *Mulan* (Caro, 2020), said, “Essentially, it’s about a young woman who comes to understand, appreciate and respect her own power”. *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) attempts to observe, understand and explore the world from a female perspective, and its perspectives and methods are full of women’s uniqueness. Mulan joining the army by cross-dressing to disguise as a man is an attempt to be “otherized”. Jinhua Dai argues that the understanding of women’s writing should be based on practical significance and a cultural standpoint. Practical significance understands that women’s writing contains many possibilities with unlimited spaces, representing an important cultural experiment. Women’s writing accounts of women’s experiences, perspectives, and observations of life that have no opportunities to be expressed for a long time contain some spaces inaccessible through the traditional male writing and examine patriarchy through women’s unique experiences and perspectives, hoping to gain women’s rights of having a voice in history, establishing equal men-women cultural relations, and furthering the poetic norms of feminism in the process of subverting and resisting male discourse (Dai, 1996).

Niki Caro puts a feminist discourse mark on the entire movie. Hollywood has been good at presenting the entire film-making process as a complete discourse system. With a female director as one of the production links in making a film, the personal pioneering experience of Niki Caro in the male discourse power-led directorship is in line with Mulan's story, forming a ritualized intertextual relationship. Born in New Zealand, Niki Caro wrote and directed *Whale Rider* (2002), a feature film based on the story of the first girl chief of an ancient New Zealand tribe. *North Country* (2005), another film with a high impact, is based on a true story of the nation's first class-action sexual harassment case, in which women miners sue male miners for sexual harassment. In addition to stories about women playing leading roles against patriarchy, she has also been involved in other types of films, e.g., *McFarland, USA* (2015) (a sports film), *Anne with an E (Season 1)* (2017) (a kids' drama) and *The Zookeeper's Wife* (2017) (a biographical film). As a female director, Niki Caro, while exploring the depth and subtleness of the expression of feminist stories, examines the diversity of different groups and people. In addition, she is also good at exploring all possibilities at the cultural level, e.g., starting with her native New Zealand culture, she explored the story of a female tribal chief. Standing at the height of multicultural integration, she accurately grasped the core of the female discourse in the story of Mulan in traditional Chinese culture and expressed that discourse in light of shared values, forming motifs of personal growth, self-realization, and freedom of thought. Niki Caro said in the *Hollywood Reporter* (2019), Mulan was "tested every step of the way and must harness her innermost strength and embrace her true potential." *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) has become a war epic drama as well as a product dominated by a female discourse system.

## 5.2 Psychological Demands of the Female Audience

The increasing awareness of the female discourse is a globalizing trend. Under the influence of the third wave of feminism, new images of women who are independent, autonomous, self-loving, and charismatic are becoming the portrayal desired by the female audience. The traditional image of Mulan joining the army by cross-dressing to disguise as a man has become a worldwide cultural resource. Certainly, there is a substantial gap between reality and women's inner needs. The anxiety related to the spiritual freedom of the female audience when dealing with reality makes them eager to escape that reality. Therefore, watching movies allows them to project their anxiety on the heroine on the screen and empathize with the psychological motivation and behavior of the heroine when resisting the

oppression of patriarchy, leading to gender identity. Furthermore, the actor who plays the heroine, as a star and role model, becomes a psychological symbol of power among the female audience, and the reshaping of the heroine myth has become important content within the popular culture system.

Female viewers are a vital driving force for film production and film genre narratives. First, they have loyal viewing habits and connect with the intrinsic value of works of art. Seger (1996) argued, “The adventure in female films is a very necessary part because the narrative paradigm requires female characters to jump out of their traditional world”. Second, their passion in the fight against the patriarchal hegemony and expectations of works of art have formed an “interpretation community” important for the development of feminist films. Female viewers’ needs for female topics and independent images of women reflect the space and trends of the development of a new feminism narrative. *Mulan*’s new image fits female viewers’ own gender roles, gender relations, life status and psychological desires.

The self-control and autonomous choice portrayed in *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) have attracted many female viewers who want to experience the charm of a strong female personality, while the obedient, conservative, conformist image of women is rejected. The new images of women that the female audience desires must break traditions and challenge new thinking. This process does not happen overnight; it takes time and experience to escape the external restraints and self-restraints of “implicit patriarchy” and then reestablish the needs and fixed expectations of the female narrative. The global box office returns for *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) have not been exceptional, being affected COVID-19 pandemic as well as the controversial strategy by Disney to stream the movie on Disney Plus, and critics are also totally divided. The film shows a *Mulan* that is too new and transcends gender and traditional goals of female growth in the past, representing a frontier issue not just in the Chinese film market, which is undergoing a preliminary exploration of gender equality, but also in the Western film market. New ideas are often controversial, but controversies provide the driving force for development. The noble quality of art lies in exploring new unknowns, including those that art itself has never controlled; therefore, art has always served the role of breaking norms and breaking the rules. As a cutting-edge art, film has great discourse power and far-reaching influence and thus the responsibility to reflect deeply on the seemingly novel but actually old themes to facilitate cultural breakthroughs. Movie audiences are constantly looking for new ideas in cinema that continuously transcend the boundaries of self-consciousness and imagination and explore new unknowns.

## 6 Conclusion

The new aesthetics of gender narratives has gradually formed and matured in contemporary film and television productions and inched forward in thwarting patriarchal cultural hegemony. Globalized film development and innovation require “Chinese stories”. Characters in Chinese culture have been portrayed as important “others” by world culture, providing an important imagination space for screenwriters, directors, actors and audiences. In China, “Hua Mulan” is portrayed as a woman who can fight like a man, accepting responsibility for family and country, and gender consciousness in this context is presented as a gender hierarchy of “who says women are inferior to men”. Mulan, walking along the path of stereotypes from China into the world, cannot get rid of her female identity even though she is dressed as a man. *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) uses the imagination of feminist films, allowing female characters to finally break the shackles of gender culture; therefore, Mulan has become an independently neutralized person who transcends gender. This not only frees up potential space for the liberation of gender roles but also warns of the difficulties of gender identity transcendence.

The intertextual narratives about Mulan provide an important example of feminist film and reflect the inner connection between world film narratives and modern social philosophy from the male gaze, gender role anxiety and the modern transformation of the female narrative regarding female self-awakening. In terms of gender relations, new types of gender relations that abolish implicit patriarchy in visual art have provided examples for real life. Feminist visual creations in the context of globalization guides people from simply watching movies to the real-life context and have become cultural resources for changing social gender relations. Mulan finally made her own voice for women in 2020, and the independent image of Chinese women has become an icon in the history of world cinema.

From the perspective of building new images of women, *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) has undertaken a cultural imagination of the female image, responds to the cultural needs of contemporary women audiences for a new female image, and transcended traditions. As a popular product, contemporary films have established a new female identity by resonating with female viewers and the establishment of a new female identity that includes independence, charisma and equality while enabling the viewers to release social anxiety and realize self-value. In the historical process of film development, the creation of new Mulan images has traced the struggle of women, including directors, actors and women audiences against implicit patriarchy. Globally, women directors are still a minority, but women audiences have become an important force in the development of commercial cinema. It is expected that the decisive power of women and their



contributions to box office and network productions could give a birth to even more new images of independent women, with more diverse narratives on gender relations.

## References

- Caro, N. (2020). *Mulan* [Motion picture]. Disney.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2006). Feminist film theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed. In *Reference and research book news*. Routledge.
- Cook, B. & Bancroft, T. (1998). *Mulan* [Motion picture]. Disney.
- Dai, J. (1996, January 16). *What is feminism?* Beijing Youth Daily.
- Dai, J. (2004). *Film criticism* (1st ed.). Peking University Press.
- Dai, J. (2007). *The Boat of crossing: Chinese women's writing and female culture in the new era*. Peking University Press.
- Hollywood Reporter. (2019a, October 4). Niki Caro talks making of "Mulan", "Horrific" prejudice female directors still face in Hollywood. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/niki-caro-making-mulan-being-a-female-director-hollywood-1245415>.
- Hollywood Reporter. (2019b, December 5). "Mulan" and the new type of Disney remake. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/why-mulan-is-a-new-type-disney-remake-1259870>.
- Liu, G. & Zhang, Xu. (1956). *Hua Mulan* [Motion picture]. Changchun Film Studio.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and other pleasures*. Indiana University Press.
- Seeger, L. (1996). *When women call the shots: The developing power and influence of women in television and film*. Kirkus Media LLC7.
- Sina Entertainment. (2009, November 27). "New Youth" issue 2: A dialog with Chucheng Ma: Mulan also needs love. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2009-11-27/ba2788335.shtml>.
- Tan, P. (1984). *Fundamentals of film aesthetics*. Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- Xia, X. (1995). "Women legends worthy of careful review" - personality ideals for women in the late Qing Dynasty. *Literature & Art Studies*, 1995(6), 87–95.