

**[Studies in Literature]**

A Study on the Construction of Female Subjectivity in Disney's Animated Film *Mulan* in Light of Articulation Theory

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Received: January 14, 2022

Accepted: February 12, 2022

Published: March 31, 2022

To cite this article: MI Yaoge. (2022). A Study on the Construction of Female Subjectivity in Disney's Animated Film *Mulan* in Light of Articulation Theory. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 140–147, DOI: [10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0201.015](https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0201.015)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0201.015>

Abstract: Disney's animated film *Mulan* is adapted from the traditional Chinese folktale "Mulan disguises herself as a man to fight on behalf of her father". Different from the loyal and filial figure of Mulan in Chinese traditional folktale, Disney portrays *Mulan* as a heroine who pursues personal value and self-actualization. Although it is quite different from Mulan figure in Chinese folktale, it is found that the construction of female subjectivity in Disney's *Mulan* is a double-layer articulation structure after a detailed analysis of the film text from the perspective of Stuart Hall's articulation theory. The purpose of the first layer of articulation is to construct the field of struggle for the construction of female subjectivity in the film, and the second layer aims to reveal the connotation of emancipation of Disney's *Mulan* figure through an analysis of the constructive process of *Mulan's* female subjectivity. Finally, it is concluded that the female subjectivity constructed in the film is based on the recognition of gender differences, integrating masculinity and femininity, and mobilizing all individuals in the society to achieve women's emancipation and gender equality. This feminist discourse provides an alternative logic for society with women's life experiences.

Keywords: articulation theory; Stuart Hall; female subjectivity; *Mulan*

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Mulan is the first animated film about an Asian Disney Princess. Although it has been released for more than 20 years, Chinese heroine Mulan is a princess favored by Disney, and Disney has successively released *Mulan II* in 2004 and live-action *Mulan* in 2020. All these phenomena show that the figure of Mulan is a huge carrier, and the story of Mulan can be reproduced continuously with the changes of the times. The film has helped Disney achieve enormous economic benefits, at the same time, the debate about the film has never stopped.

Feminist researchers affirm the stimulating effect on women in general, and many scholars have different

opinions on the degree of encouragement Mulan brings to women as well. According to Limbach, Mulan's transgression against patriarchal norms is negated when she returns to her former domestic role (Limbach 2013: 126). Many scholars who hold the same opinion also think that, to some extent, encouragement is restrained (Yin 2011; Dundes & Streiff 2016; Sulistia 2016). They think that Mulan's final return to her family symbolizes her return to the patriarchal social system. However, the dichotomous perspective will limit the vision of research, and it will be difficult to find Mulan's subversive power on the feminist issue. By exploring Mulan's female subjectivity through articulation theory, this research will try to release the positive significance given to Mulan as a female figure in *Mulan*.

1. Introduction to Articulation Theory and Female Subjectivity

1.1 *Articulation theory*

The articulation theory was introduced into cultural studies by Stuart Hall. The articulation is not only an important research method but also an insightful cultural criticism theory. Lawrence Grossberg states that "Articulation transforms cultural studies from a model of communication (production-text-consumption; encoding-decoding) to a theory of contexts" (1993: 4). According to John Fiske, Stuart Hall's articulation theory "brings together social and economic relations, historical conditions, and language in a way that has opened up some of the richest strands of work in cultural studies" (1996: 213). Stuart Hall's inquiry on the articulation theory lasted for many years, and finally, he made the most detailed explanation of the articulation theory in the interview with Lawrence Grossberg. Hall says:

"In England, the term has a nice double meaning because 'articulate' means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected. The two parts are connected, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage that is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So, the so-called 'unity' of discourse is the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Grossberg 1996: 141-142).

Stuart Hall not only explains the rich connotation of articulation, but also breaks the stereotype of analyzing practical problems from a static perspective, and develops the dynamic perspective of articulation—disarticulation—rearticulation. Hall states that popular culture is "the arena of consent and resistance" (Hall 1981:



239). Cultural text is not the source of meaning but can produce various fields of meaning in a specific context for specific and perhaps antagonistic social interests. As Elvis Presley's music proves, the rebellious teenagers, the rusticity of the working class, the ethnic roots, and other elements are articulated together and respond to the call for each other (Xu 2013: 151). The meaning of the cultural text is always the field of struggle and negotiation.

The completion of articulation is to construct the unity between different factors. Articulation is the production of "identity on top of difference", of "unities out of fragments", of "structures across practices" (Grossberg 1992: 54). Therefore, articulation is not a static finished object, but a dynamic process of continuous articulation—disarticulation—rearticulation. Hall emphasizes the importance of unity, namely the idea of "unities-in-difference" (Hall 1988: 45). However, what is important is not the conclusion of unities-in-difference, but how it differs and how it is unified, that is, the process of unity, which Hall emphasizes most. The theory has become an explanatory theory and analytical method for cultural studies to reveal the dynamic generativity and diversified initiatives of culture.

1.2 *Female subjectivity*

Subjectivity is a very important philosophical concept that is related to consciousness, agency, personality, reality, and truth (Solomon 2005). Subjectivity is the essence and condition for an individual to become a subject. Only when an individual acts as an agent of his or her conscious activities, can he or she be called a "subject".

Mary Wollstonecraft is the first feminist to conduct a detailed discussion on female subjectivity. She tries to abandon the idea of subjectivity based on Phallogentrism and establish female subjectivity (1988). However, her exposition fails to get rid of the obstruction of essentialism, which is a common problem for early feminists.

The concept of female subjectivity is greatly promoted by Simone de Beauvoir. Her masterwork *The Second Sex* is regarded as the Bible of western women. Her subtle judgment of "one is not born a woman but becomes one" (De Beauvoir 2011) makes women see a new world and infinite new possibilities. However, the female subjectivity she emphasized is still defined by men in the patriarchal society.

Luce Irigaray puts forward the hypothesis that "the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'" (1985: 133) and resists the idea that women must undergo self-alienation to become men if they want to become philosophical subjects. She reveals how men use identity to interpret women and society, thus constructing a patriarchal society. She states that "one speaks, the others are silent" (1985: 256), thus emphasizing the dominant position of male discourse.

Zhao Xiaohua has made an important contribution to the research field of female subjectivity. In her view, female subjectivity is a kind of self-affirmation of women's strength and ability, and a kind of self-conscious initiative reflected in social life practice activities, in which women recognize their various strengths as subjects, and consciously demand their continuous improvement and perfection in status, ability, lifestyle, intellectual level, personality shaping, mental health and so on (Zhao 2004: 12).

In short, the discussion on female subjectivity pays attention to women's status, ability, mental health and initiative, and so on. The developing concept is aiming to change women's status as objects under the influence of patriarchal culture, and to build a bridge for equal communication between men and women, to provide

society with an alternative logic of women's life experience.

2. First Layer of Articulation: Field of Struggle for Female Subjectivity

Mulan, the figure of heroine Mulan and her inspiring story have aroused Mulan-mania all over the world. However, Chinese audiences have an indescribable feeling of “familiar stranger” about it. Only in this specially constructed utopian field can it provide the possibility for exploring the constructive process of Mulan's female subjectivity.

2.1 *Manifestations of disarticulation*

The prototype of Mulan's story is the Yuefu folktale *The Ballad of Mulan* in the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Mulan in the poem is a heroine with loyalty and filial piety. For a long time, Hua Mulan in Chinese cultural tradition had been a model of Chinese traditional women: a tender and filial daughter at home, a brave and intelligent soldier on the battlefield, a courtier without lust for power in the royal court. But the spirit of individualism in Mulan is obvious. She does not care about petty conventions, she is eager to find her place in society, and she is longing for self-discovery and personal actualization. Just as Peter Schneider, the President of Disney Feature Animation, explains that “The search for who we are, and the search for self, is an ever-ongoing process and universal theme” (Kurtti 1998: 189).

There are many portrayals of characters in the film, which promote the development of the film plot by misreading Chinese cultures, such as Mushu and matchmaker. Take the matchmaker as an example, she seems to be an examiner. In fact, according to the investigation of many scholars, the role of the matchmaker is real in Chinese history, but the activity of matchmaker interviews is false. The matchmaker's role is not to be a girl censor, but to act as an intermediary between men and women. If there is no matchmaker, there will be a lack of etiquette. The role of the matchmaker in *Mulan* is to roughly disarticulate Mulan away from the traditional Chinese female role, and urge Mulan to embark on the road of self-discovery and personal actualization.

2.2 *Manifestations of rearticulation*

Filial piety is a very difficult concept for western audiences to understand. Dean DeBlois points out that “I think the pivotal relationship of the movie evolved out of the notion that we were dealing with a ‘foreign’ ideal, doing something purely out of honor, a duty that you're born to uphold and therefore do without question; Honor is a pretty universal concept, but to label it as honor and not give a specific example of why a person would want to live up to that—we found ourselves tripping over it” (Kurtti 1998: 116). This shows that it is difficult to find a corresponding concept to explain the concept of filial piety in western culture. Therefore, Disney takes the reciprocal love between Mulan and her father and brings honor to the family as the reason for joining the army. Disney transforms the filial piety theme highlighted in the Chinese cultural context into a more understandable concept for westerners.

In fact, in *The Ballad of Mulan*, the story is launched on the premise of recognizing the compliance of women disguised as men: Mulan has been in the army for 12 years and disguised as a man for 12 years. Therefore, she does not have any conflict with the institutional environment that discriminates against women.

Thus, the narrative avoids any contradictions, conflicts, and challenges between discourses brought about by the sexist system. On the contrary, Disney directly rearticulates the gender issue at the core of the whole narrative when adapting Mulan's story, and constructs the contradiction and conflict between gender discourse, making it the leading factor to advance the plots until the narrative intention is completed.

2.3 Utopian field of struggle for female subjectivity

The Mulan figure of Disney is far different from the princesses portrayed by Disney in the past. Mulan is not only a soldier who defends the country through cross-dressing but also a fighter who strives for gender equality for women. Finally, through her bravery, Mulan successfully changes the gender discourse environment of her life. With the approval of the emperor, Mulan successfully breaks the gender stereotype of secular society represented by prime minister Chi Fu. This inspiring result cannot be achieved by Mulan alone, and the idealized society has played an important role in breaking gender discrimination. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that Disney's shocking effect on female subjectivity can only be achieved through fairy tale imagination and utopianism of Chinese society because the subversive power to Mulan's figure has completely exceeded the existing life logic of western society.

"Mulan is not genuinely Chinese, nor is it all American. It has become a transcultural text: a combination of old and new, traditional and modern, East and West, collectivism and individualism, female submissiveness and women's liberation, filial piety and reciprocal love between father and daughter." (Chan 2001: 241). After Disney's transformation, Mulan's figure has been mixed, which is not representative of a certain culture, but a representative of a global culture. Similarly, Disney has successfully created a field to discuss the struggle of female subjectivity by disarticulating and rearticulating Mulan's personality and Chinese elements.

3. Second Layer of Articulation: The Constructive Process of Mulan's Female Subjectivity

3.1 Original articulation: Mulan's passivity

Women don't have the space to think and speak independently, and their life routes are prescribed. When they are grown up, they should be prepared to find a good match. And being a wife and mother is the only way out for girls. Women are described as materialized objects.

Female aphasia can be revealed in the communication with three typical male characters. The first character is prime minister Chi Fu. He is full of prejudice against women and forcibly packs his prejudice into social rules. He not only represents himself but also is regarded as the spokesman of the patriarchal society full of gender inequality. The second person is Shang. His absolute trust in Mulan is based on her "male" identity, but after Mulan's gender exposure, Shang denies everything Mulan has done before because of the gender issue. In the process of communicating with such characters, women's words are often ignored. The last character is Mulan's father. On one hand, he is an open-minded parent. On the other hand, he is an accomplice to the patriarchal gender stereotype. He believes that men and women should know their places.

3.2 Disarticulation: Mulan's struggle against the gender binary

Women's biased gender roles are defined by gender stereotypes. Mulan can think and reflect and have doubts about her gender role defined by society and family. Mulan is in the embryonic stage of becoming the subject of thinking. And this is an important factor to disarticulate the gender stereotype and realize the construction of female subjectivity.

As a daughter, Mulan fails to fulfill her parents' expectations of passing the matchmaker interview. She is eager to pursue self-discovery and personal actualization. Therefore, Mulan performs a male through cross-dressing and joins the army, thus gaining power originally monopolized by men. Although cross-dressing has some characteristics of transgressing role norms, the social gender attribute of men's wear obeys the setting of social gender roles by gender stereotypes. That is to say, if a woman wants to gain power and a position in the patriarchal society, cross-dressing is a necessary step.

However, empowering women through cross-dressing is a blatant challenge to supporters of mainstream gender norms. Therefore, Mulan must expose her gender in the film, thus facing the life crisis brought about by gender transgression. This shows Disney's caution in the face of the gender binary. Disney denies Mulan's gender transgression, but this is not to deny Mulan's pursuit of female subjectivity. The denial of Mulan's gender transgression can appease the supporters of mainstream gender norms, and also shows Disney's attitude towards Mulan's exploration of female subjectivity. It seems to deny Mulan's possibility of entering the society, but in fact, Disney believes that the society Mulan entered through cross-dressing is still patriarchal, and seeking a position in a patriarchal society still puts Mulan under the rule of patriarchal society. Therefore, Mulan cannot be satisfied with entering the patriarchal society through cross-dressing in the process of seeking female subjectivity. Mulan should face up to the physical differences between men and women and construct female subjectivity based on the differences.

3.3 Rearticulation: Formation of Mulan's female subjectivity

Mulan's joining the army is a disarticulation of the gender binary or gender stereotype, while the seemingly miserable abandonment of Mulan is a further disarticulation of patriarchal society in the process of exploring female subjectivity. It is also from the turning point of the abandonment that Mulan is on the right path of exploring female subjectivity.

When she sees the remnants of the Huns hurrying towards the capital, Mulan puts the abandonment aside out of her sense of responsibility and rides away to warn Shang and her other friends. Since then, Mulan has been participating in this battle as a woman. Mulan has realized that she has the same abilities as men, so she is no longer helpless, but shows herself as a woman gracefully. Gender differences are only differenced themselves, which have no additional significance. Sometimes, the differences between genders are far less than those between individuals.

In Mulan, there are two completely different model characters. The first one is the women who are limited by the rules and regulations in the matchmaker interview. And the second one is men like Shang. Women who are not obedient will be regarded as violating social norms, just like Mulan. If men do not have a sense of strength, they will also be despised by society, just like prime minister Chi Fu. The division between masculinity



and femininity comes from a gender stereotype. But in fact, gender stereotype does not create masculine men and feminine women, it only creates two gender roles. Mulan's success proves that masculinity and femininity do not correspond to a specific gender, and the integration of masculinity and femininity is sometimes a better gender temperament.

The acquisition of female subjectivity has never been a matter for women themselves. Mulan's ability is recognized by her three friends. They were aggressive at first, but under the influence of Mulan, they begin to solve problems with their brains. This proves that men and women can learn from each other, not oppose each other. Emancipation of women needs the participation of every individual, and emancipation of women will in turn bring about emancipation for individuals.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of articulation theory, this paper discusses the constructive process of female subjectivity in Disney's animated film *Mulan* by dividing it into two layers of articulation. The first layer mainly discusses the field of *Mulan*'s exploration of female subjectivity. The research shows that this film has misinterpretation in the use of Chinese elements, but misinterpretation can be divided into positive misinterpretation and negative misinterpretation. Disney's efforts in promoting cross-cultural communication are worthy of recognition. At the same time, the purpose of Disney's active cross-cultural communication is trying to put Mulan in a utopian idealized society through its active construction, so that Mulan can explore the female subjectivity more thoroughly and deeply. The second layer mainly studies Mulan's process from being a passive object to gradually gaining female subjectivity. Mulan is a passive object in the original articulation, an object materialized by the patriarchal society, and the "other" suffering from aphasia. These oppressions against women are rooted in the internalization of gender stereotypes in the patriarchal society as if there is no possibility to resist oppression. However, with the issuance of the draft order, Mulan takes the first step to join the army for her father, and her cross-dressing is the beginning of her disarticulation from gender stereotypes. Through cross-dressing, Mulan discovers the long-suppressed power in her body. However, the life crisis brought by gender transgression excludes Mulan disguised as a man from the patriarchal society, which seems to be a compromise to the supporters of traditional gender norms, but it is also a disarticulation to Mulan's idea of realizing female subjectivity in the patriarchal society. By constructing the identity of men and women, it is not the subjectivity that women want, because, in the patriarchal society, women are always the "other" of the gender and the subsidiary of men, which is not true gender equality. In the film, Mulan's female identity is exposed before she sets foot on the correct path of exploring female subjectivity. Finally, a kind of female subjectivity, which respects gender differences, unifies masculinity and femininity, and provides an alternative logic for society with women's life experience, is rearticulated into Mulan's figure. This feminist discourse aims to unite all individuals to liberate themselves while liberating women.

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(Editor: LENG Xueyuan)