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An Analysis of the Image of Mulan – Original Meanings and Modern Thoughts

A cultural image is a compact description of a cultural reality created from individuals or groups, and it displays the cultural and ideological space of the social context of its time. The process of creating an image can thus be regarded as a narrative and expressive mechanism triggered by a specific social phenomenon (a book, an event, or a figure.etc), and once the image is created, it can be handed down from generation to generation and finally merge into their spiritual culture. I find that, when trying to focus on the description of women warrior and the female image as a specific scope, the story of Mulan naturally and even inevitably becomes one of the most familiar images throughout the Chinese history. Here, her identity as a warrior and her female gender are inseparably inlaid into the elements of the unique cultural image she constructed. However, as the image of Mulan has been broadly recognized in contemporary society, and as literatures have repeatedly applied her images of heroine in various “reasonable” ways to weight the role of individual female, family and patriotism, are we able to discover the hidden constraints behind using Mulan’s prototyped image? In fact, when the image of Mulan becomes an easy phrase and a simple tool of stereotyping daily view of female heroines in the Chinese culture, we risk the danger of forgetting its original meanings and distorting the image.

Mulan’s image has been placed firmly in the memory of Chinese culture. To inspect the image of Mullan originally standing for, we first need to understand that the Ballad of Mulan is not really a story about advocating the courage and mettle of Mulan, but rather to suggest the moral quality of "loyalty"(忠) and "filial piety" (孝). Using merely about a

hundred words, the Ballad of Mulan tells a complete and compelling story of her disguising as a man, joining the army that her father was supposed to, buying weapons, fighting in a severe war and returning with triumph without accepting the rewards given by the emperor. What a soul-inspiring legend! But if we compare the Ballad of Mulan with many other poetry that has the description of the war, its omitted rendering of the war is quite obvious. In fact, throughout the song, we can find only 30 words describing the severe bloodshed: "She went thousands of miles to battle, She flew across fortified passes. The north wind carried the sounds of the march, And cold light shone on her armor. After many a battle the general died, After ten years the stout troops went home. - 万里赴戎机，关山度若飞。朔气传金柝，寒光照铁衣。将军百战死，壮士十年归。" (An anthology of,1996). What is written in the rest of the poem is not about the war itself, but rather emphasizing the extraordinary behavior of Mulan before and after the war. The author spends twice the amount of words just to describe the scene of Mulan returning home: "When her parents heard that their daughter had come,

They came out of the town, leaning one on another.... - 爷娘闻女来，出郭相扶将..."(An anthology of,1996). The reason of Mulan's prewar and postwar actions dominating the major part of the poem is that these two actions are utterly unusual. For a female, learning how to use weapon and martial art is generally a privilege only enjoyed by the royal family at Mulan's time, and dressing up in men's suite also severely contradicts the social awareness of gender order at that time. But curiously enough in the ballad, Mulan's unusual action does not seem to offend the social mores at all and there is also no sign of depreciating her action of any kind perceivable from the song. The reason behind this is that there are other more oppressive and stronger calls overriding the other rules for Mulan to obey, which are "loyalty (忠)" and "filial piety (孝)" to her father and her family, and these are the most valued virtue

in her time. Thus we reach the conclusion that one of the main ideas of this song is about Mulan's quality of "忠" and "孝".

If we explore even further, it's not difficult to find some other virtues attached to Mulan's image. Mulan is not only an extraordinary warrior but also a ordinary family girl, and the dignity and honor she gained during the war doesn't seem to shake her will to return back to home at all. After she put on her old cloth and met her old friends, she might completely forget her identity as a warrior before. In other words, the value of Mulan's story is not her contributions and dedications to the war as a warrior, but rather the quality of refusing the great material rewards: "Her deeds raised her rank by twelve degrees, He gave her a hundred thousand and more. - 策勋十二转，赏赐百千强。" (An anthology of,1996) offered by the emperor and her pressing desire to return back home and become what she used to be before. Thus, the Ballad of Mulan also emphasizes and promotes the quality of returning back to an original and tranquil state after gaining great reputation and honor. Such quality is referred as "淡泊名利" (indifferent to fame and fortune) in Chinese culture, which is considered a noble and superior virtue that is very hard to achieve. Therefore, the image of Mulan becomes quite clearly a paragon of the Chinese traditional virtues of "忠", "孝", "淡泊名利", or any other similar concepts.

With all these features underlying the poem, the image of Mulan suddenly becomes a multi-dimension story that is easy to expand, and many later literature works have reused the image over and over again. A very compact term "木兰从军" (Mulan joins the army) became a modern phrase Chinese people use to deliver the image of Mulan nowadays. This version of simplified summary of the story (Mulan joins the army) is full of subtle variation in expressions and carries multiple rhetorical meanings which can evoke different sorts of emotion, imagination and memories. In 1920s, the Ballad of Mulan was first re-named and

re-defined in the context of Mei Lanfang's writing of Peking Opera "木兰从军" (Mulan joins the army). In Mei's adaptation, Mulan's image was incorporated in the performance against the feudal ethics and was intended to promote the desire of women to seek liberation. During the Anti-Japanese War, Zhou Yibai's adaptation of the play "Hua Mulan" was to suggest the national resentment of the aggression of Japanese army and to advocate the ideology of nationalism via Mulan's image. Besides, Lin Yan's revision of the play "Mulan" during the period of Liberation War emphasized the urgent demand of the public's capability of self-protection and self-defense against the enemy and highlights the theme of patriotism. More recently, with the development of audio and video technology, Mulan has also entered the film production of Disney's 1998 animated version of "Hua Mulan". It successfully displayed the cross-cultural context in the image of Mulan via a globally recognized framework - the distinction between her self-consciousness and self-awareness are intertwined with the discord of her male identity during the war, and such disagreement is resolved along the journey of finding the spirit of herself. Therefore Mulan's image, if properly handled, can certainly emulate other cartoon stars such as Superman, Spiderman and Batman.etc.

It seems that any representation of Mulan's image, although may not perfectly precise, cannot be fallible. But does it mean that we can use her image in an imprecise fashion for political purpose or for generating profit that the usage has almost diverts or even eliminates the original meaning of the image? Certainly not. Adapting Mulan's image for political interests during war periods distorts the original message sent by the image and misguides the public to a wrong general understanding of the image, which would further erode the cultural and historical awareness of the people as the central value of an image fails to be preserved in the general public. After the Disney film "Hua Mulan" was released, there were a lot voices disagreeing the heavily westernized image of Mulan and the lost of her intrinsic identity of "忠" and "孝". Although the film was economically successful for a

profit of 300 million dollars, it not even got close to impress the audience with the Chinese traditional concept of “忠” and “孝”. Another modern abuse of the image of Mulan is the popular analogy between Mulan and socially competitive women who perform excellently in their careers. Since the image of Mulan has almost become the definition of a capable woman, it has also become a popular way of self-interpretation for many women in recent years. But they fail to see the original property of “淡泊名利” associated with the image.

In a society where cultural symbols and images continued to be dominantly created by males, the image of Mulan is a very valuable and exceptional one that we need to treat carefully and thoughtfully. Admittedly, a cultural image can generate new understandings and perspectives to accommodate the need of any sort of social change. But a cultural image should not be regarded as a formula or algorithm that we simply use as a function to generate outputs from different inputs. The image of Mulan is an excellent example of not only being used as a constant cultural symbol, but also being used as a reproduction process. When extending or reconstructing the meanings of a cultural image, we should put extra care in reinterpreting its original meaning and avoid the risk of forgetting the original thoughts inspired by the image.

References

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