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“LET’S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS”: A HANDBOOK OF HEROIC TRANSFORMATION IN MULAN

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American media has few popular films and TV shows that showcase strong Asian or Asian American representation. Among the limited list are *Joy Luck Club* (1993), *Rush Hour* (1998), and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2017). Walt Disney’s *Mulan* (1998), adds to this list the heroic story of Fa Mulan, whose unique character is both female and Asian. Mulan, who is kind hearted, brave, and easy to relate to, has since become an international hero that continues to inspire an appreciation for and to highlight Asian culture in the media. The story is based on the legend of Hua Mulan, which was originally told as a poem known as the *Ballad of Mulan*. Since the legend has been passed down from as far back as the sixth century, thousands of people have recognized Hua Mulan as a hero. Today, Disney’s *Mulan* inspires us, especially young women and girls to awaken the heroic qualities that lie within ourselves. These qualities may then be applied to fighting against our society’s sexism and confining gender roles as well as to finding our true personal identities. Using recent research on heroism, we can better understand and utilize Mulan’s heroic example.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Mulan's story closely follows the hero's journey, or Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero. The journey includes departure, initiation, and return (Campbell, 1949). Departure, or the separation of the hero from their normal world, begins with a "call to adventure." While in the "normal world," Mulan is devoted to bringing honor to her family. Although she sincerely desires to make her family proud, her free-spirited personality and her inability to conform and to follow tradition makes it difficult for her to do so. Mulan struggles to fit into the stereotypically feminine gender roles set by the patriarchy in the film and clashes with the expectation that she must try and secure a marriage. After disappointing her family through failing her meeting with the matchmaker, the situation seems bleak. Suddenly, a call to adventure creates for her an opportunity to depart from the world that she cannot fit into nor thrive in. This opportunity presents itself when the Huns invade China, causing the Imperial City of China to call for a man from each family to serve in the war against the Huns. When Mulan's old and injured father is drafted, she resolves to save his life by dressing up as a man and taking his place. Mulan responds to her call to adventure by taking off during the night with her father's armor, a haircut, and her horse.

Initiation, or "the challenges, obstacles, and foes that must be overcome for the hero to prevail," (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017) begins once Mulan's meeting with the matchmaker turns into a disaster. The matchmaker says to Mulan, "you may look like a bride, but you will never bring your family honor!" (The Matchmaker, Disney, 1998) After having disappointed her family, Mulan is then faced with difficult questions concerning her own identity, purpose, and role. As initiation continues, Mulan is faced with more adversities after arriving at the training camp. Her first task is to learn how to resemble and act as she and her companion, Mushu, believe a man would. With a slightly humorous, rocky, and misguided start, she is able to become "Ping" for her time spent undercover. In addition, she must also endure the physically arduous training required to become a strong and competent soldier.

At the end of the film, Mulan makes a return to her family's home. Her journey was extremely successful, having been able to defeat Shan Yu and

the rest of the Huns with the entire Imperial City of China and emperor to witness. Although the emperor awards her with gifts of appreciation and recognition for her service, she is more grateful to have been able to find peace within herself and to return to her loving family. Her father welcomes her back with a heart full of gratitude, pride, and relief. By the end of the film, Mulan not only succeeds in bringing honor to her family, but she has also been able to uncover truths about herself and an identity that she embraces.

As part of the hero's transformation, Joseph Campbell (1949) discusses death, whether it be a physical or spiritual death. One of the more specific deaths in the film occurs after Mulan's departure from her old life. This leads to the "death" of her old character, who is without greater responsibility and feels lost in her role in life and society. Once arrived at the training camp, a birth to a new character, "Ping", sparks the beginning of an even broader transformation, during which Mulan grows from the lost individual to a brave, intelligent, and defiant hero.

To further analyze Mulan's heroic transformation, it is useful to invoke Allison and Goethals' (2017) "three missing pieces of the neophyte hero". The first piece, which details a shift from egocentricity to sociocentricity, is embodied by Mulan's transformation throughout the film. At the start of the movie, Mulan is focused mainly on personal challenges such as the desire to complete her chores and responsibilities, as well as to make her family proud. By the end, however, Mulan's goals and focus have shifted outward and toward protecting her friends, as well as toward protecting the people of China. The change from egocentricity to sociocentricity is also seen through her gain in companions. Although initially Mulan had few companions besides her family members, she eventually becomes surrounded by friends, family, and allies. Similarly, Mulan achieves sociocentricity as an additional effect of gaining respect and recognition from the citizens of China.

The second piece, which is achieved by moving away from dependency and towards autonomy (Allison & Goethals, 2017), explains that the hero must be independent, willing to move against society, and able to pioneer new paths. This idea draws from Joseph Campbell's (2004) wisdom that we must all "follow our bliss", meaning that we must pursue what is most important, fulfilling, and valuable to ourselves. Expanding upon this thought, Allison and Goethals (2017) state that "we do not find our bliss by following a trail blazed

by others.” Mulan, who is at first unable to identify, much less “follow” her bliss, eventually discovers that her journey is meant to be one full of trail blazing and autonomy. Mulan develops a strong sense of autonomy by the end of the film, allowing her to defy the expectations set in her society that women cannot and should not fight, speak up, or act independently.

Mulan’s developmental growth follows the third transformational arc described by Allison and Goethals (2017): the arc from stagnation to growth. From merely trying to live up to what was expected of her as a subdued young woman to enduring and thriving from training and battle, we observe as Mulan grows as a person and transforms into a hero. Mulan herself is able to learn, reflect upon, and consequently gain from her experiences, as well.

Additional components of the research on heroic transformation include questions of whether the journey is voluntary or involuntary and from who or what the hero receives help (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Allison et al., 2019).

Mulan’s journey is both voluntary and involuntary – it is involuntary because she had no choice in that the war would come to her home and family, but at the same time, voluntary because she had chosen to take her father’s place. On her journey she is given both physical and spiritual help. Her companions, Mushu, Cri-Kee, and her horse, Khan, provide physical help while her ancestors provide her spiritual help. The ancestors, who sent Mushu to Mulan, also help Mulan by protecting and watching over her and her family. Her main sidekick Mushu is helpful in many instances, and sometimes even saves her life. He gives her advice, provides companionship, and often works behind the scenes to ensure her success. For example, Mushu plays a crucial role in saving China and Mulan’s life when he sets off the firework that defeats Shan Yu.

TAXONOMY OF HEROES

Based on Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo’s (2011) situation-based taxonomy of heroes, we can define Mulan as a civil hero and a military hero. Although many of her heroic actions are implemented through saving others in battle, her brave decision to take her father’s place as a mere citizen, and on top of that as a woman in her society, shows her civil heroism. Mulan is also an example of the classic underdog – viewers want to see her succeed, even if her chances are unlikely.

Using Allison and Goethals' (2012) taxonomy of heroes, we can define Mulan as a traditional hero, or a hero that is moral, competent, or complete, and makes exceptional contributions over time. Mulan does not only display these characteristics, but makes an exceptional contribution to the people of China by saving lives and by defeating the Huns.

Lastly, Mulan is a cultural hero to people across the world, regardless of race or gender. At the University of Richmond, Asian American, Non-Asian American, and international students from China were asked how they felt about Mulan as a hero. The general consensus among Asian American students was that Mulan's Asian heritage helps make her into a more personal and relatable hero. After asking international students about the reputation and impact of Mulan in China, it was generally said that the movie is well-appreciated and popular like it is in America.

"The Great Eight" Traits

"The Great Eight" attributes heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2011) can be used to describe Mulan's heroic characteristics. Allison and Goethals surveyed people's descriptions of heroes and identified the eight most commonly used attributes used to describe them. These attributes are: smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. It is easy to find instances of all these traits throughout the movie, starting with intelligence. Part of what makes Mulan a successful hero and warrior is her ability to make up for a lack of pure strength with intelligence and wit. During training, Mulan is the first to be able to retrieve the arrow from the top of a pole – a test created by general Li Shang. The soldier is supposed to have on one wrist a heavy medallion that symbolizes strength, and on the other, one that symbolizes discipline.

Although the task seemed impossible and none of the stronger soldiers were able to retrieve the arrow, Mulan is the first to retrieve the arrow by tying the two medallions together and using them to make climbing easier. Upon reaching the top, she has proven herself and has gained the respect of the other soldiers, including Shang. In another scene, Mulan wittingly causes an avalanche which wipes out most of the Hun soldiers, saving her allies and winning the battle. In the final battle scene, Shan Yu, the leader of the Huns, says to Mulan, "it looks like you're out of ideas," after cornering her on the roof (Shan Yu, Mulan, 1998). Of course, Mulan is able to think quickly and with the help

of Mushu, she cleverly uses a firework to defeat Shan Yu. At the imperial city, Mulan's leadership amongst Yao, Ling, Chien Po, and Shang as well as her inspiring determination, courage, and loyalty make the group successful in saving the emperor and defeating the Huns.

The non-battle related defining traits within Mulan's character become apparent through her relationships with others. Her high capacity for love and compassion are evident when she risks her life to join the army to save her father's life. In the avalanche scene, Mulan risks her life again to save Shang from being swept away by the snow. Although she has the opportunity to take cover and save herself, she pulls herself and Khan back into the powerful snow to go back for Shang. Later, we see Mulan's loyalty and selfless personality when, even after having been exiled by Shang and the rest of the army, she returns to warn him and the other soldiers that the Huns are going to attack. Mulan's strong sense of morality and dedication to her homeland drove her to hurry back to the city and fight the Huns even after having been abandoned.

In addition, Mulan's charismatic personality earns followers that appreciate and respect her for her heroic actions, whether they be friends, family, or the citizens of China. By the end of the story, Shang falls in love with Mulan, becoming enamored by her ability to fight well, her kindness and morality, and her bold spirit. We as viewers also find Mulan to be likable because she is genuinely kind and easygoing, and at times even has a great sense of humor. For example, towards the start of the film, we watch as Mulan completes her chore of feeding the chickens by attaching a bone on a string to the back of her dog's collar. This laid-back and playful way to complete her chores makes her likable and relatable to the viewers. By the end of the film, we are glad to see that Mulan's relaxed, warm, and cheerful personality at the start of the film does not diminish because of her transformation into a warrior. Her character satisfies all the traits of "The Great Eight," surely defining her as a hero.

Missing Inner Quality

Although they may have great traits, heroes are often missing an inner quality at the beginning of their heroic journey, according to Allison and Goethals (2017). One of the central themes that the film is built around is Mulan's search for her missing inner "quality." Allison and Goethals define this as "a fundamental truth

about oneself or the world” that the hero may be lacking. In this situation, Mulan’s missing quality is her lack of self-understanding and her obliviousness about why she does not fit into her society. It is only after she matures through her inner challenges and battle experiences that she truly grows into herself. Her struggle with her identity begins with the matchmaker scene. Her sorrow and fear are told explicitly through the song “Reflection,” in which she sings the lyrics, “... I will never pass for a perfect bride Or a perfect daughter... Why is my reflection someone I don’t know Somehow I cannot hide Who I am Though I’ve tried” (Lea Salonga, 1998). After her hero’s journey, she returns with more knowledge about herself; she knows that she is strong, independent, and intelligent. Mulan comes back with the understanding that her ability to be the “perfect daughter” and to follow the social norms that did not fit well with her did not define her worth. Mulan was able to prove to herself that she could find a truer and greater purpose, identity, and version of herself.

More on the Hero’s Transformation

Mulan’s transformation begins with a literal one. A montage in the film shows her cutting her hair, tying it up, putting on her father’s armor, and taking his sword. Although she transforms physically into a male soldier, her real hero’s transformation had just begun. The mental and figurative part of her transformation begins when she arrives at the training camp, at which her perseverance and determination are tested. Although at first she is seen struggling with the physically demanding and arduous tasks of the training, she succeeds in becoming a physically competent soldier. By the end of training, she is able to run with heavy buckets of water on her back, fight with a staff, fish by hand, and shoot arrows. Other types of experiences, such as suffering and hardships, transformed her, as well. After Mulan and the others arrive as reinforcement only to find that the previous troops had already been killed in battle, Mulan must overcome the devastating emotions brought on by war and death. By the time she reaches her final stage of transformation, she has been strengthened emotionally and physically by her training and experiences, and she is ready to step up to become the hero that saves the day.

Suffering

Suffering plays a critical role in the hero’s transformation (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). The benefits of suffering are that it is redemptive, signifies a crossover

point in life, encourages humility, stimulates compassion, promotes social union, and instills meaning and purpose. Mulan suffers at first, from struggling with her identity, to withstanding tough training, to being expelled from the army. "Reflection" shows an internal suffering that signified a crossover point in Mulan's life – the realization that where she was in life was not the right place, and that it did not align with who she felt like she was. The training camp scenes exhibit physical suffering, and her expulsion shows again emotional suffering that stimulates compassion from viewers. The culmination of the low points at which we see Mulan is a crucial step of her hero transformation. These low points lead us to sympathize with her, strengthening our feelings toward her as a hero, as well as add to the glory of her eventual redemption. After the emperor is saved by Mulan, he compares her to a flower, saying that "the flower that blooms in adversity is the most beautiful and rare of them all" (The Emperor of China, Mulan, Disney, 1998).

HEROES AND UNDERDOGS

Mulan's role as an underdog is highlighted by the strong correlation between heroes and underdogs. Throughout the film, the audience is encouraged to root for Mulan because she is a woman who is told that she cannot do what a man can do. As an underdog fighting against sexism, we appreciate the rebelliousness that makes Mulan an advocate for feminism in the story. We need her to survive the war and save china in order to gain the respect of her family and friends, to love and become at peace with herself, and to represent and empower women.

As previously mentioned, Mulan is an underdog of a few different groups. At the beginning of the film, she is an underdog in her society at home. She does not fit in with the other women and constantly receives backlash and reprimand when trying to move against the norm. We watch as Mulan struggles to become the traditional woman preparing to be married in imperial China, and we sympathize with her throughout her disastrous meeting with the matchmaker. Likewise, Mulan finds herself as a physical underdog in the army. As a woman, Mulan's feminine physical and nonphysical characteristics make it difficult for her to fit in with the other men. Immediately upon arriving at the training grounds, Mulan (as Ping) starts a brawl by accident, causing the soldiers

to already alienate her. Through the course of a montage and a catchy song, viewers are glad to see Mulan overcome the various adversities and eventually succeed while earning the trust and respect of her peers. From the very beginning, the audience roots for her due to a combination of her greatness as a character and having formidable odds stacked against her.

CONCLUSION

Mulan presents to us a fight against societal norms, a journey of finding and proving oneself, and an inspiring story of bravery and love. Drawing upon different avenues of heroism science research, we have been able to define and analyze Mulan's character and transformation, and we have shown how these two elements impact real people in the story. Mulan inspires people across different backgrounds, genders, and ages to be defiant and to be unforgiving of one's own self. Mulan's story instills in us the courage to defy and break through the constraints that society often imposes upon us, which in turn may lead to social progress and even an increased understanding of self-identity.

In addition, Mulan is one of few pop culture heroes in America to be of Asian descent. Hopefully, we will see more and more Asian representation in the media as time progresses – with great stories of not just Chinese Americans, but of Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, and other Asian American heroes and heroines. We could apply the examples of heroism from Mulan and possibly benefit ourselves by breaking through and progressing beyond the many social forces set upon us. We can all work toward eliminating gender stereotypes, prejudices, and sexism by taking with us the lessons from this great heroine and by becoming similar heroes ourselves.

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