

Defying Expectations: Gender Roles and the Balance of Masculine and Feminine Traits in Disney's *Mulan* (2020)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses Disney's live-action *Mulan* (2020), focusing on Mulan's defiance of traditional roles. This movie highlights the theme of female empowerment as she frees herself from conventional female roles. This study examines Mulan's behaviors that are inconsistent with the expected gender roles, leading to her liberation by embracing both her feminine and masculine traits. This analysis employs two main theories: The social Role theory, which focuses on gender roles, and Confucianism as a supporting concept, to analyze Mulan's behaviors that are inconsistent with traditional roles. The second one is the Bem Sex Inventory, which identifies the masculine and feminine traits that Mulan embodies, incorporating Giddens' concept of agency to analyze the ways Mulan liberates herself from the expected roles. The finding reveals that Mulan's defiance comes from her desire to remain true to herself as she liberates herself by embracing her feminine and masculine traits.

Keywords: agency, confucianism, defiance, feminine and masculine traits, social roles

INTRODUCTION

The Walt Disney Studios are renowned for producing family-friendly movies, particularly aimed at young audiences (Daniel Pereira, 2025). Walt Disney began his career in 1922, making animated films based on fables and fairy tales. The studio's first remarkable success began with its iconic characters, such as Mickey Mouse, Dumbo, Bambi, and many more. According to Entertainment Weekly (2022), in 1937, Disney took a massive step by producing dreamy, fairytale-like animated movies, which are known as the Disney Princesses. These Disney Princesses have become beloved figures among young girls, whom they consider role models, as their kindness and loving personas have made a lasting impression on generations of viewers.

Throughout the years, the Disney Princess characters have evolved from damsels in distress to powerful women. According to Aslihan Alp in The Stanford Daily (2021), the Disney Princesses animations are divided into three eras: the Classical Era (1937-1959), the Renaissance Era (1989-1999), and the New Age Era (2009-present). The Classical Era (1937-1959) consists of Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). These princesses are the damsels in distress, waiting for someone to rescue them. They also conform to conventional standards of beauty. In the Renaissance Era (1989-1999), these Disney princesses are called the "rebel children era," which consists of Ariel from The Little Mermaid (1989), Belle from Beauty and The Beast (1991), Jasmine from Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas (1995), and Mulan (1998). These princesses represent an improvement over the Classical Era, as they make the princesses curious about the world rather than confining them to domestic tasks. Disney still adheres to the motif of princesses needing their princes. But Mulan is the only princess whose love interest remains in the background. She is known to be the bravest and strongest princess of all. The New Age Era (2009-present) is the latest era of the Disney Princesses. This era is known as the "independent women era," which includes Tiana from The Princess and The Frog (2009), Rapunzel from Tangled (2010), Merida from Brave (2012), Elsa

and Anna from *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya* from *Raya and The Last Dragon* (2021). These Disney Princesses are the most recent and most equal era of Disney. It emphasizes that women can do anything they want, even if it defies tradition, and not be demure. In this era of Princesses, most of their love interests or romances remain in the background of the story, as seen in *Mulan* (1998), and some even have no love interest at all, such as *Merida* (2012), *Elsa* (2013), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya* (2021). With a total of 15 Disney Princess animation movies produced by Disney, these films have gained immense popularity. According to Cinemablend, *Mulan* ranked fourth as the most loved Disney princess. *Mulan* is considered a unique Princess among all the others because, technically, she is not one of them. She has no royal blood, nor is she married to a royal. But *Mulan* exhibits an act of heroism by saving her country, which earns her the title of a princess.

Following Disney's success in producing the Disney Princess animation films, the company expanded its reach by producing live-action movies adapted from the animated versions of Disney princesses. Disney has made a total of six live-action Disney Princess movies. Among the live-action movies produced by Disney, we will focus on one particular Disney princess who defies the traditional role of women: *Mulan*. *Mulan* was released in 2020 during the pandemic. The 2020 live-action adaptation of *Mulan* differs slightly from the animated version. The setting and plot remain; this movie tells the story of a young woman named Fa *Mulan*, who challenges the social expectations of women. *Mulan* is known to be very different from other girls of her age. She prefers to be out and explore rather than being confined to the home, learning to be a good housewife, unlike her sister *Xiu*, who is very feminine and enjoys traditional feminine roles. Her refusal to follow the traditional gender role is evident when she refuses the arranged marriage proposal and displeases the matchmaker. This act draws more criticism towards her because women are expected to uphold the family honor through marriage. When the Emperor declared that one man from each family must participate in defending China, *Mulan* defied the gender norms and liberated herself by running away from home to take her father's place, disguising herself as a man. In the army, *Mulan* endures rigorous training. Although she faced numerous difficulties, she eventually proved herself and earned the respect of her fellow soldiers and the captain. After her identity as a woman is revealed, *Mulan* must face the consequences of being tricked and dismissed. The story ended with *Mulan* succeeding in saving her country and the Emperor. The Emperor even considers *Mulan* a warrior. Upon returning to her village, *Mulan* is welcomed with honor and pride. She succeeds in bringing honor to her family not through marriage but through other forms of deed.

This paper uses Eagly's concept of social role, particularly in the context of gender. The Social Role concept encompasses the various positions that men and women typically hold within society, resulting in differences in their behavior and social interactions. "One such process is the formation of gender roles, by which people are expected to have characteristics that equip them for the activities typical of their sex." (Eagly et al., 2004, p. 270). This explains certain expectations on how to behave for men and women, which are related to their sex. Men are more likely to be the family provider and head of the household. In contrast, women are more likely to assume traditional domestic roles, such as homemaker and caregiver to children (Eagly et al., 2004). The concept of gender roles typically encompasses shared ideas or "shared expectations that society has given based on their socially identified sex" (Eagly, 1987). This concept is derived from the broader concept of social role. As a result, behaviors are judged by society, considering how frequently they are believed to be performed by a particular gender. In other words, people tend to think that women and men should exhibit different behaviors (Hall and Carter, 1999) because others expect them to do so. According to Blair (2002) and Dijksterhuis & Bargh (2001), these judgments that society has placed upon people are in the form of "verbal and nonverbal behaviors." When they judge them, they are not aware of it because a particular behavior has triggered their minds. So, it is done unconsciously and implicitly. By applying Eagly's Social Role theory, a deeper understanding can be gained of how

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social roles and gender roles shape expectations between the sexes. This highlights the influence of social norms that can help uncover the expected gender roles that Mulan defies in her behavior, actions, and attire. To help understand Mulan's society and background, contextualizing the patriarchy in Chinese culture is necessary. This is because Gender roles and social roles usually exist in a patriarchal society. From Mulan's background, it is evident that the story is set in ancient China, where people value traditional norms, filial piety, and Confucian beliefs, particularly in how women's behaviors are judged by society. A scholar named Ban Zhao stated that there are four things that women must consider regarding their behavior, "Womanly.virtue, Womanly speech, Womanly appearance, Womanly work" (Ban Zhao, 1999).

The second theory we will use in analyzing this paper is the theory of feminine and masculine traits. We will use Sandra L. Bem's The Bem Sex-Inventory (BSRI) to identify Mulan's traits that are considered feminine and masculine to answer how Mulan breaks free from the expected gender roles. There are 60 traits in total, divided into 20 masculine traits, 20 feminine traits, and 20 neutral traits. Mulan embodies four traits out of 20 that are both feminine and masculine. The feminine traits include affection, sensitivity, compassion, and loyalty. Whereas, the masculine traits are leadership, willingness to take risks, strong personality, and assertiveness. However, we will only discuss two traits out of 4 for both feminine and masculine traits that Mulan embodies. To analyze Mulan's act of liberation, agency is necessary. Thus, adding Giddens' concept of agency will help to analyze Mulan's act of liberation. According to Giddens, agency "refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place" (Giddens 1984, P. 9). In other words, the concept of agency is about having the control or power to make choices and take actions in your life. Therefore, by applying Giddens' theory of agency, this theory supports Mulan's liberating herself, which stems from her ability to take action and embrace both feminine and masculine traits.

This paper aims to investigate the actions that are inconsistent with Mulan's expected gender roles and how she liberates herself from the expected roles given by her society. This study is significant because it highlights the evolving portrayal of gender roles in popular media, specifically in the case of Disney. Focusing on Mulan's live-action character. We can understand how traditional norms that dictate how women should or should not act are challenged. In Mulan's society, she is expected to behave and act in a certain way, such as being silent, obeying her family's words, and being a good wife. However, Mulan breaks away from these expectations and shows us that women can be strong and independent. Therefore, we are interested in analyzing this movie because Mulan is one of the Disney princesses who broke the traditional gender roles associated with women among Disney princesses. She is the only princess known to be the bravest in challenging and rebelling against traditional gender roles by demonstrating her strength, leadership, and resilience within a patriarchal society that values traditional norms. This is a notable departure from the stories of other Disney princesses that Disney has produced. Though she is portrayed as an Asian woman in China, where arranged marriage is common, she defies these expectations. Not only that, this text also highlights the themes of female empowerment, defiance of gender roles, and women as warriors, as it shows that not all women in children's movies are princesses of some sort. It could also take the form of others, such as a warrior or an independent woman, and explore other themes that inspire female empowerment.

MULAN'S DEFIANCE AND LIBERATION

This part will be divided into two main parts. In the first part, we will analyze the expected gender roles that society expects Mulan to fulfil and Mulan's actions that are

inconsistent with these roles, illustrating how traditional norms in ancient China dictate women's roles within their family and community. In the second part, we will analyze the ways Mulan liberates herself as a way to prove herself and others. Her decisions will enable her to exercise her agency and embrace her feminine and masculine traits.

Mulan's Defiance of the Expected Gender Role.

As a woman, Mulan is expected to fulfil traditional female roles, such as homemaker and caretaker of children (Eagly et al., 2004). Mulan's actions are inconsistent with conventional gender roles for women. Thus, this part will discuss the shared expectations that Mulan receives from society, namely, the matchmaker, her mother, and her father. Three people share the same values as the traditional values: the matchmaker, her mother, and her father. But the matchmaker is one of the individuals within Mulan's society who have high expectations for women to adhere to conventional norms. A matchmaker's role is to facilitate a successful marriage arrangement, serving as a bridge between the two families to ensure the arrangement is successful. In Mulan's era, it was a common practice to consult a matchmaker, as it was believed that doing so would help unite two families of equal standing and boost their family status. In other words, by going to the matchmaker and marrying the man who was chosen for her, Mulan could bring honor to her family. In the meeting, the matchmaker explicitly highlights the qualities that are expected from a "good wife,"

MATCHMAKER: Quiet. Composed. Graceful. Elegant. Poised. Polite. These are the qualities... we see in a good wife. These are the qualities... we see in Mulan.

This scene deeply highlights the values expected from a woman; they must be "Quiet. Composed. Graceful. Elegant. Poised. Polite". The values or expectations placed upon Mulan by the matchmaker reflect the two principles established by Ban Zhao, namely, womanly virtue and womanly speech. These principles require women to uphold strong moral values, be diligent in household tasks, and speak only when appropriate. Quoted by Ban Zhao (1999), a woman must "guard carefully her chastity, to control circumspectly her behavior, in every motion, to exhibit modesty, and to model each act on the best usage". In Ban Zhao's womanly speech, she mentioned that a woman must "Speak at appropriate times and not to be offensive to others, may be called womanly speech." (Admonitions For Women, Ban Zhao, 1999). These two virtues align with the matchmaker values of a good woman. To become a 'good woman,' a woman must behave carefully, show modesty, and follow the best examples of a good woman's behavior while avoiding vulgar words and carefully handling their choice of words.

The matchmaker's words highlight the traditional expectation that women should be submissive and serve their husbands well.

MATCHMAKER: When a wife serves her husband...she must be silent. She must be... invisible.

These words highlight how men are regarded as the dominant figures while women are expected to assume subservient roles. This aligns well with the social expectations that Eagly has mentioned, where men are more likely to be the family provider and head of the household. In contrast, women are more likely to assume traditional domestic roles, such as homemaker and caregiver to children (The Psychology of Gender, 2004). Furthermore, this scene highlights the expectation of Mulan's family to bring honor to their family by seeking a matchmaker for an arranged marriage, as well as the expected behavior of women in her era. Women are expected to be good wives and serve their husbands well by being demure, silent, invisible, and elegant.

However, Mulan's actions and beliefs are contrary to the social expectations and the traditional gender roles of how a woman should act. Based on the matchmaker's expectations, Mulan is expected to be "quiet, composed, graceful, elegant, poised, and polite". Mulan does not possess all these qualities. Mulan is portrayed as a skilled, active, and adventurous young girl from a young age. Mulan is known to naturally display traits such as agility and fearlessness. Her traits are not something that is taught; they are a part of who she truly is. Her

agility just comes naturally because she possesses a strong Chi. Mulan's actions are viewed as improper and unladylike. In Mulan's society, women are expected to be quiet, obedient, and graceful. Mulan does not possess these qualities; she is not elegant, but rather someone who fearlessly runs around the roof chasing chickens, in contrast to her sister, Xiu. Xiu embraces the expectation of how a girl should behave. Xiu enjoys learning how to sew clothes, staying indoors to do chores, and following her mother's wishes. But the two sisters act based on their own choices. The two of them are very close and do not see their differences as a conflict or competition to become the favorite daughter.

When Mulan climbs on the roof, the townspeople gather to see what is happening, and they see Mulan running around with the stick to guide the chicken back. Mulan receives verbal and nonverbal consequences for failing to meet the shared social expectations. The nonverbal consequence she receives is disapproving glances and gestures from the townspeople, and the verbal consequence is more explicit, as it harms her and tarnishes her family's reputation. The Matchmaker calls out Mulan for failing the matchmaking test,

MATCHMAKER: Dishonor to the Hua family. They have failed to raise a good daughter.

The statement above makes Mulan feel humiliated, and the people around her glare at her and blame her family for not raising her well as a daughter. In Mulan's society, people around her place a deep value on the roles of a woman and a daughter's job. A woman needs to respect their elders and bring honor to the family, and a daughter's failure is also seen as the failure of her family. This can be seen from Confucius' beliefs. The statement above makes Mulan feel humiliated, and the people around her glare at them and blame her family for not raising her well as a daughter. In Mulan's society, people around her place a deep value on the roles of a woman and a daughter's job. A woman needs to respect their elders and bring honor to the family, and a daughter's failure is also seen as the failure of her family. This is evident in Confucius' beliefs, which emphasize the importance of having deep respect for one's family, particularly towards the elderly. The behavior of the daughter reflects how their parents raise and educate them.

Overall, Mulan has tried her best to conform to the shared expectations of her society that a woman should be quiet, graceful, and elegant by not using her Chi, going to the matchmaker, adorning herself with makeup, and wearing a dress. However, Mulan's characteristics are different from those of other women from a very young age. She is very agile, adventurous, and resilient. Therefore, Mulan's behavior is always seen as inappropriate due to her background, where Chinese traditions and patriarchal status are deeply valued, which makes her receive social consequences because of her agile nature. This indicates how her environment valued their cultural traditions and expected women to act demurely, stay silent, and dress appropriately, which aligns well with the traditional gender roles where women are the caretakers of the family and the empath rather than the ones who should be dominant and powerful.

MULAN'S WAYS TO LIBERATE HERSELF FROM THE EXPECTED GENDER ROLE.

As a woman, Mulan is expected to conform to the shared expectations discussed above. However, she challenges those norms by exercising her agency, allowing her to take control of her own life and bring honor to her family. Mulan demonstrates her act of liberation by embracing both her feminine and masculine traits. Therefore, this part of the analysis will

highlight how Mulan's action embodies gender role defiance, emphasizing the importance of self-determination in shaping one's identity.

Mulan's Assertion of Her Agency

Mulan demonstrates her agency by taking control of her life and defying social expectations. Despite being taught to suppress her Chi, Mulan's masquerade as a man enables her to showcase her warrior abilities and overcome the challenges she faces. Mulan's father taught her to suppress her Chi because he believed that her Chi was meant for a man and a warrior. But when Mulan ran away and masqueraded as a man, she seized this chance to master her warrior abilities (Chi) and overcome challenges.

COMMANDER: Your chi is powerful, Hua Jun. Why do you hide it?

MULAN: I... I don't know.

COMMANDER: The chi pervades the universe and all living things. We are all born with it. But only the most true will connect deeply to his chi...and become a great warrior.

This conversation reveals that Mulan is hesitant to fully utilize her Chi because she has been accustomed to hiding it since childhood, as using it often ends up disappointing her parents. Mulan's hesitation, "I... I don't know," reflects her conflicted mind; she is torn between embracing her true self and burdening herself with her father's words, which makes her hide her Chi. Mulan hides her Chi because she thinks it is the safest way to protect her family from society's judgment. Mulan had tarnished their family's image once by unleashing her Chi when she was young, which gave the townspeople an unpleasant impression. So, she tried to hide her Chi and confront the gender role, but it did not work. After the conversation with the commander, she realized that her Chi is not something to be suppressed but rather something to be embraced. She was born with that powerful Chi, which is a gift that not many people receive efficiently. Mulan tries to embrace and accept her Chi during her training with the other soldiers. The turning point for Mulan's complete embrace of her Chi is when her comrades are in trouble during the battle. She decides to discard her male disguise and reveal her true identity to her comrades because she feels wrong for hiding her true self.

Mulan's Embracing both her Feminine and Masculine Traits.

Mulan's way of liberating herself from the shared expectation includes embracing her feminine and masculine traits. In this section of the analysis, we will utilize the BSRI theory to support our discussion. BSRI, or Bem Sex Inventory, is a theory that measures the psychological gender traits between the Feminine and Masculine sides of an individual. Bem's scale was based on how masculine and feminine characteristics were seen as desirable for men and women.

Mulan's Embracing her Feminine Traits.

Mulan's feminine traits play a crucial role in her journey, demonstrating that strength is not limited to physical power. Mulan exhibits 2 of the feminine traits from the BSRI theory, which include being affectionate and being sensitive. Instead of viewing these traits as weaknesses, Mulan unconsciously embraces them despite her resilient nature and uses them to inspire and support others. By embracing her feminine side, Mulan shows that true strength comes from the heart. Mulan may appear strong and fearless, but she has a softer and more affectionate side, especially toward her family.

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Figure 1: Mulan saves Xiu's image in front of the matchmaker.

From figure 1, it is seen that Mulan is trying to protect her sister's image when a spider threatens to cause embarrassment. This small but meaningful act towards her sister demonstrates Mulan's deep care for her family and her prioritization of their well-being. It shows that her strength is not just about bravery in battle, but also about protecting and supporting those she cares about. This unconsciously reflects her nurturing and considerate nature, highlighting that femininity and strength can coexist. It challenges the idea that being strong means being emotionless. Instead, Mulan shows that caring for others is a powerful strength.

To add, Mulan's sensitivity towards her family is another key aspect of her feminine traits, especially when it comes to her father,



Figure 2: Mulan is being empathic and sensitive, witnessing her father struggle.

Mulan silently witnesses her father struggle with his sword. This showcases her profound empathy and emotional sensitivity. Mulan is not just observing, but she also feels his struggle and pain. Having empathy reflects her nurturing and considerate nature, a trait often associated with women. Mulan understands that her father is not the strong warrior he once was, yet he is willing to sacrifice for the family's honor. Instead of confronting him directly, Mulan only observes her father in silence. Her sensitivity reflects her ability to see beyond strength and pride, recognizing the emotional weight her father carries. This moment emphasizes that caring for others is not always about action, but it can also be about understanding and being an emotional support.

Mulan's Embracing her Masculine Traits.

Mulan's journey involves challenging traditional gender roles by embracing her masculine traits. Mulan embodies two characteristics from the BSRI theory that are typically associated with men, namely leadership and a willingness to take risks; both are crucial to her growth and success. These traits set her apart in a patriarchal society that expects women to be obedient and submissive. Instead of conforming to these expectations, Mulan embraces these qualities to prove her worth as a warrior, ultimately earning respect and recognition.

Mulan's leadership is evident when she is expelled from the warriors. She returned to take action, leading them to the Emperor's castle to stop the enemy.

COMMANDER: Hua Mulan... your actions have brought disgrace and dishonour to this regiment...to this kingdom, and to your own family. But your loyalty and bravery are without question. You will lead us as we ride to the Imperial City. Ready the horses. Despite being expelled by the commander, she does not retreat in shame; instead, she steps up and fulfils her duty to protect the kingdom. Her willingness to put honor and duty above personal consequences demonstrates her strong leadership qualities. She does not wait for permission to act—she takes the initiative, showing her courage and strategic thinking by warning her comrades of the enemy's attack on the Emperor's castle. Furthermore, the commander acknowledged Mulan's bravery and loyalty by saying, "Your loyalty and bravery are without question. You will lead us as we ride to the Imperial City. Ready the horses." Solidifies her role as a leader and how the commander acknowledges her as an equal. Although she was seen as a "traitor" for hiding her true identity, her actions prove that true honor comes from one's actions.

According to the BSRI theory, this trait is typically associated with men who are willing to take risks. However, in this case, Mulan was seen risking her life on multiple occasions to save her fellow soldiers and her country.



Figure 3: Mulan triggering the avalanche

One of the most striking examples is the avalanche scene, where she risks her life to end the battle. As the enemy launches an attack, Mulan devises a bold strategy to redirect the enemy's forces, triggering an avalanche that buries the opposing troops. Instead of retreating to safety, she charges into the avalanche, risking being swept away to rescue her fellow soldiers. This shows her selflessness and quick thinking regardless of her gender. Mulan also demonstrates dominance, utilizing her agility and intelligence to outsmart Bori Khan rather than relying solely on brute strength. This indicates that assertiveness encompasses not only physical power but also confidence and decisiveness.

Overall, it is clear that Mulan demonstrates her agency powerfully. She finally liberates herself and takes control of her life by running away from home and embracing her Chi. This illustrates the first choice she made in her life, which aligns well with Giddens' concept of agency. When she ran away from home and masqueraded as a man, she did not fully embrace her. As her journey progressed, she grew accustomed to practicing and utilizing her Chi, thanks to the commander's encouragement. Her journey took a turning point when she revealed her true identity as a woman, and that is where she fully embraces her Chi. Mulan faced some tempting benefits when she encountered the witch, but Mulan refused the offer and made a powerful choice by standing on her ground, and that is to protect the emperor and the city. Not only that, Mulan also embraces her feminine and masculine sides, proving that strength is not always about physical power; it can also come from within, which aligns with the BSRI theory. Most people might think that she lacks a feminine side, but if we look a little deeper, she has a feminine side, as evident in her deep love for her family, especially her sister and father. However, her masculine side might be more evident throughout the movie, as she is portrayed as a strong woman.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this research shows Mulan's journey of challenging the traditional gender roles that society expected her to fulfil. Not only does she defy the conventional gender role expectations, but she also embraces both her masculine and feminine sides. However, most think Mulan only possesses masculine traits, such as leadership skills and bravery. Upon closer examination, Mulan has a feminine side, characterised by her affection for her family, care, loyalty, and many other qualities. Moreover, Mulan's ability to embrace both her feminine and masculine sides proves that these qualities are not limited to any gender. Her ability to balance both feminine and masculine traits demonstrates that gender roles are only socially constructed rather than inherent or fixed. Ultimately, Mulan serves as an example of female empowerment. By embracing her authentic self, Mulan inspires women to break free from social norms and choose their path.

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