



Discursive Constructions of Patriarchy in *Mulan* (2020): A Study of Language, Culture, and Power

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Keywords

Patriarchy, Discourse, Mulan (2020), Power, Culture

Abstract

This study investigates the representation of Chinese patriarchal culture through linguistic expressions in Disney's 2020 live-action film *Mulan*. Employing a descriptive-qualitative method and grounded in a sociolinguistic framework, particularly the intersection of language and gender, this research analyzes how patriarchal values are encoded in character dialogue. A relational analysis approach, informed by gender and family relation theories, reveals distinct speech patterns between male and female characters. Male characters predominantly use declarative and evaluative speech acts characterized by positive metaphorical expressions, signifying authority and affirmation within the societal hierarchy. Conversely, female characters' utterances are largely expressive and commissive in nature, often marked by negative metaphors, reflecting marginalization and constrained agency. The findings suggest that patriarchal cultural norms continue to shape social expectations and restrict women's participation in the public sphere. Within the narrative, gender roles are assigned based on biological sex rather than individual competence or evolving social identities, underscoring the persistence of gender-based power asymmetries in Chinese patriarchal discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural representation in global media plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences understand identity, tradition, and power across societies. The legend of Hua Mulan, a story rooted in ancient Chinese folklore, has long inspired narratives of courage, filial piety, and gender defiance. Popularized globally through Disney's 1998 animated adaptation, *Mulan* became an iconic figure of strength and resilience. In October 2020, Disney reimaged the tale in a live-action format, aiming to offer a more culturally grounded and visually dramatic portrayal. The story centers on Mulan, a young woman from a Chinese family who disguises herself as a male soldier to take her ailing father's place in battle, a decision that ultimately brings honor to her family and challenges traditional gender roles (Dong 2011; Hsieh & Matoush 2012).

The controversy of story adaptation related to cultural appropriation is another problem of the movie (Dong 2011; Tang 2008; Yin 2011). Some of them argues the movie is failed to represent Chinese culture especially culture of northern Chinese Dynasty (385-581 AD) that adopted by the origin folklore "*The Ballad of Mulan*" (Dong 2011; Hsieh and Matoush 2012). Mulan categorized as Northern Ballad Folklore. Northern Ballad portray as haunted by death and violence where woman as study to the point of being tough (Dong 2011). Southern ballads were reflected as soft, gentle and fragile. Meanwhile Mulan is portrait as women who is fearless but being limited by the believe of her surrounded who are soft, local, and fragile.

The differences seeing Mulan constructed as story is not only exist in Disney but also other versions of Mulan, like; Fa Mulan the southern equivalent with Hua Mulan (Hsieh and Matoush 2012; Witt 2007). Disney is the most influential animated film production made dramatic stories to make it more interesting. The interest in Disney is not purely tell the folklore but more as commercial product designed (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011; Golden and Jacoby 2018; Tang 2008; Yin 2011). Disney plays big role as influencer of children and people through its productions, that is the reason why Disney create artistic inspiration plot in each movie produced. Disney transform the stories, improved it become so emotional and meaningful stories for the audiences (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011).

In Mulan live action Movie, I perceive complexity as identity. Not only the complexity of brave women who lived in Chinese culture or identity searching of young woman (Hsieh and Matoush 2012). But also, the practice of culture in language used. Culture and language are unseparated aspects constructed in society (Anugerahwati 2020; Hall 1997). Setting of Mulan in Northern Dynasties (386-581) and considered as classic Chinese literature (Dong 2011). The depiction of society in Mulan live Action movie is ruled by the kingdom. Society follows and give up their live just to follow command from the kingdom. The conflict appears when the armies asked society to participate in greatest war. Here the story started by Mulan join the forces wear man soldier identity to replace her sick father. before she joining the war, I already observed language used among the characters. How society obey the kingdom

not only show the relational between language and power but also more about language gender and culture. Although prior research on *Mulan* has addressed issues such as cultural appropriation, identity formation, and historical authenticity, there remains a significant gap in examining how patriarchal ideologies are linguistically and discursively constructed within the 2020 live-action adaptation. Existing scholarship often foregrounds visual narratives and character arcs, yet underexplores how language operates as a vehicle of power, reinforcing gender hierarchies within the socio-cultural fabric of the film. This study seeks to fill that void by analyzing how discourse in *Mulan* (2020) reproduces, negotiates, or challenges patriarchal norms through culturally embedded expressions of language, thus offering a critical intersectional lens on language, culture, and power. Research question discussed are:

1. How are signs of patriarchal culture represented through linguistic codes in *Mulan* (2020)?
2. How patriarchal culture translated as power domination in *Mulan* Live Action Movie.

Numerous studies have explored the legend of *Mulan* across the fields of literature, media studies, and cultural communication. However, only a limited number have examined the intersection between language use and cultural representation, particularly in relation to how patriarchal ideologies are discursively constructed and reproduced. This indicates a significant research gap that my study aims to address. By focusing on the linguistic dimensions of the *Mulan*(2020) live-action film, this research offers a novel perspective on how patriarchal values are embedded in language and internalized by audiences—including impressionable viewers such as children. Through this lens, my research not only contributes to academic knowledge but also promotes critical media literacy in understanding how gender ideologies operate through popular cultural narratives.

Several existing studies share thematic similarities with my research and provide a foundational context for this inquiry. Hsieh and Matoush (2012) investigated the construction of identity in various adaptations of *Mulan*, highlighting the inconsistencies across three major versions and how they influence young audiences' understanding of cultural and gender roles. Framed within a media and business perspective, their study emphasizes the influence of production context in shaping narrative cohesion. Similarly, Yin (2011) contrasted Disney's interpretation with traditional Chinese folklore, demonstrating how the animated film reflects U.S. popular culture's racial and gender ideologies. Rather than promoting the Confucian values of filial piety and relational loyalty central to the original ballad, Disney's version imposes a Western feminist lens that overshadows the indigenous cultural meanings.

Tang (2008), in contrast, offered a cross-cultural perspective by analyzing the translation of subtitles from Chinese to English. The study reveals how language mediates cultural perception, showing that audience interpretations of *Mulan* are shaped by their socio-demographic background and exposure to Western values. This underscores the idea that language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a cultural filter.

These three studies provide critical insights into identity, media framing, and intercultural communication, and they align with the thematic concerns of my research. However, none of them fully address how language within the film explicitly constructs, reinforces, or negotiates patriarchal norms. My study, therefore, builds on this existing scholarship by integrating discourse analysis with cultural studies to reveal how patriarchal ideologies are linguistically enacted in *Mulan*(2020).

My research builds on this foundation by applying a critical discourse analysis framework to examine how the *Mulan*(2020) live-action film discursively constructs patriarchal ideologies through language, particularly in the context of Chinese cultural expectations around gender, family, and power. This approach draws from two theoretical pillars: Chinese patriarchal ideology and Hall's theory of cultural representation.

In the context of Chinese patriarchy, gender roles are sharply divided between the public and private spheres, where men are positioned as societal actors and women are confined to domestic responsibilities (Sangwha 1999; Chang 2019). The influence of Communist ideology in China has further complicated these roles by de-emphasizing the private sphere in favor of state-driven narratives, resulting in heightened expectations on both genders to conform to rigid societal standards (Attané 2013; Song & Ji 2020). Women's social value is often tied to marriage and family duties, reinforcing their subordinate status within a male-dominated cultural framework (Fan 1996).

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation provides the foundation to analyze how language constructs meaning in media. Hall (1997) posits that representation is not merely reflective but constitutive meaning is created through signs, symbols, and language that are shared within a cultural code. In this framework, language becomes a tool through which ideology is circulated and maintained. By examining the linguistic choices in *Mulan*, I aim to uncover how patriarchal norms are embedded within familial dialogue, societal commands, and the film's broader narrative structure.

Additionally, Holmes and Meyerhoff's (2003) gender and language theory supports the analysis by emphasizing how linguistic forms reflect gendered identities shaped by social norms. This study is not limited to lexical features but extends to interactional dynamics and role-based language use in the film, particularly within the family and institutional hierarchies that shape Mulan's journey.

Through the integration of these theories, this research highlights how patriarchal values are not only visually represented but also encoded in the linguistic fabric of the narrative. By revealing the discursive strategies that normalize male dominance and female subservience in the *Mulan* live-action film, this study contributes a critical lens to media literacy and sociolinguistics. It also serves as a cultural reflection, encouraging viewers particularly educators, parents, and young audiences—to critically engage with the media they consume and recognize how language can subtly reinforce societal ideologies.

In doing so, this research not only fills a significant gap in current scholarship but also offers a meaningful contribution to the broader discourse on language, culture, and gendered power in global media.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research design to explore the discursive construction of patriarchal ideology in Disney's *Mulan* (2020) live-action film. Data were collected through close observation and transcription of the film's dialogue, with particular attention to lexical items and phrases used across various scenes. The entire film comprises approximately 280 scenes, from which 11 scenes were purposively selected based on their relevance to cultural and gendered discourses. The analysis proceeded through several structured stages. First, the data were analyzed using Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation (1997) in conjunction with the language and gender framework by Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003). These theoretical perspectives were used to identify how gender roles and cultural ideologies are constructed through language within familial and institutional contexts in the film. Second, scenes were categorized according to gendered language use and family-role interactions, enabling a focused examination of how hierarchical relationships are communicated through dialogue. Special attention was given to relational dynamics in conversations between characters occupying different gender and social roles. Third, the study analyzed the lexical choices of characters based on gender, observing how specific word choices reflect broader patterns of dominance, submission, authority, or resistance. These linguistic patterns were compiled into tables and visualized through bar charts to highlight differences in language use between male and female characters. Semantic analysis was then applied to interpret the meaning and implications of these lexical forms. Finally, the findings were synthesized and discussed in relation to both the empirical observations and relevant literature. This discussion aims to illustrate how language in *Mulan* (2020) functions as a cultural vehicle that both reflects and reinforces patriarchal values within Chinese sociocultural frameworks..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion are organized into two main sections: (a) linguistic and gendered indicators of patriarchal culture, and (b) manifestations of patriarchal culture as a form of women's oppression.

Linguistic and Gendered Indicators of Patriarchal Culture

This study reveals clear linguistic manifestations of patriarchal structures in the live-action *Mulan* (2020) through gendered patterns of speech acts. The analysis is based on filtered scenes (see Table 1, Appendix), with utterances categorized by hierarchical dynamics, emotional proximity, and lexical metaphors, all of which reflect broader gender ideologies embedded within the film.

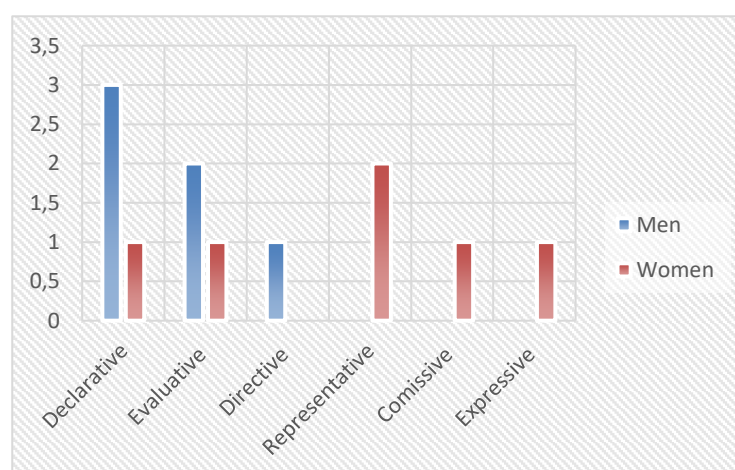
Table 1 Linguistic Codes and Hierarchical Structures

Category	Men	Women
Hierarchy	Control	Controlled
	Explicit	Implicit
Closeness	Logic	Emotion
Lexical Used	Positive Metaphorical	Negative Metaphorical
	Bless	Burden

Categories listing above is translation process in picture 1 and 2. Each element is analyzed based on data's code. The data divided into three categories that being analyzed based on form and lexical meaning in the following table and chart.

Table 2 Data Analysis

Category	Men	Code	Form	Women	Code	Form
Hierarchy	Control	D2-S2	Directive	Controlled	<i>Silence</i>	-
		D4-S3	Declarative		D5-S3	Commissive
		D13-S7	Evaluative Declarative		D15-S8	Representative
Closeness	Logic	D10-S6	Declarative	Emotion	D1-S1	Representative
		D9-S6	Evaluative		D7-S5	Expressive
		D14-S8	Declarative		D12-S6	Declarative
Category	Men	Metaphor	Meaning	Women	Metaphor	Meaning
Lexical Used	Positive	Warrior	Savior	Negative	Imposter	Liar
		Honor	Struggle		Honor	Marriage
		Son	Blessed		Daughter	Burden

**Figure 1** Chart of Speech Acts Retrived from Data

The analysis above reveals that signs of patriarchal culture are evident in the forms of language used within speech act performances, particularly in relation to hierarchical and relational dynamics. Women predominantly employ representative speech acts, while men more frequently use declarative

and evaluative forms. These speech act choices reflect the internalization of patriarchal norms, where gendered power relations are linguistically encoded. The hierarchy between men and women is manifested through the contrast between control and subordination.

Men's use of declarative and evaluative speech acts signifies their dominant role in shaping and directing communicative exchanges. Through direct and authoritative utterances, men assert control over conversational contexts. In contrast, women's speech is characterized by representative and expressive forms, which tend to seek validation and reflect emotional states. The representative acts used by women suggest a linguistic positioning that requires acknowledgment from those in authority, typically male figures thus reinforcing their subordinated role.

Evaluative utterances by male characters serve not only to express opinions but also to enact judgment and assign responsibility, often delivered with a tone of rational authority. Meanwhile, women's expressive acts are more emotionally charged, frequently conveying feelings such as frustration, dissatisfaction, or sadness.

Living within a patriarchal culture, women are often conditioned to seek approval from male authority figures, as emphasized by Sangwha (1999). This is particularly evident in men's declarative statements, which function as authoritative commands that require no validation. Furthermore, commissive speech acts in the film, often expressed by female characters, illustrate both obedience and subordination. These acts reveal women's limited agency, as they are compelled to accept and commit to male directives even when those commands conflict with their own desires or well-being. These dynamic underscores the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal ideology embedded in the language practices portrayed in the film.

Father: It is what is best for our family. **D4-S3**

Mulan: It is best. I will bring honor to us all. **D5-S3**

The extract above shown the utterance of Mulan in D5 is the response through declarative sentence made by father in D4. The emphasize word of Mulan saying "it is best" is not declarative but more like the obedience expression from her father utterance. It also indicates Mulan heavily accept it, because of burden created by family. It shown by the word "I will bring honor to us all". Honor in her construction is made because of social judgment and arise by patriarchal value. The extract above also an example of uninterrupted conversation which being controlled by man who dominate the communication process. The utterance of men seems like Absolut right with no doubt.

Ironically, the construction of patriarchal value in language is not only uttered by men but also women. See the extract below.

Mother: You forgot, Mulan is a daughter, not a son. A daughter brings honor

through marriage. **DI-S1**

Madame Matchmaker: We see in Mulan. When a wife serves her husband, she must be silent. **D6-S4**

The extract above shows the stereotype of men domination also practiced by women. The women come from old generation who strongly uphold the tradition. They accept and practice the patriarchal culture as a tradition that need to be preserve and imposed to their daughter or new generation. The phenomenon indicates how patriarchal culture in Chinese is exist since long time ago and digest to all women living in Northern Dynasty. More the discussion about how the practice of culture oppressed women development discussed below.

Manifestations of Patriarchal Culture as a Form of Women's Oppression

From a lexical perspective, this discussion draws on semantic analysis to interpret metaphorical language choices that are closely associated with male and female characters. These lexical choices reflect the dichotomy of the public and private spheres central to patriarchal culture in China. As Stewart and Strathern (2017) note, patriarchal systems in China and more broadly across Asia are deeply ingrained cultural structures that individuals are expected to internalize and uphold.

Mulan vividly portrays these patriarchal values through its use of language, particularly the concept of “honor.” In the male-dominated worldview, “honor” is linked to valor and sacrifice in warfare, while in the female domain, it is equated with fulfilling societal expectations through marriage. The film demonstrates this through commissive speech acts, such as when Mulan is expected to enter into an arranged marriage. For men, achieving honor involves becoming a “warrior” who fights to protect tradition and family. In contrast, women are confined to roles centered on marriage, motherhood, and domestic labor (Chang 2019; Sangwha 1999).

A striking example of gendered lexical construction occurs when Mulan, despite her competence on the battlefield (D18-S10), is labeled an “imposter” due to her gender. This metaphor highlights the deeply rooted identity politics within patriarchal ideology. Lexical items such as “son” and “daughter,” while both denoting familial roles, carry different connotations. In patriarchal societies, “son” is associated with honor, blessing, and societal respect (Attané 2013), while “daughter” is linked to responsibility and the need for protection, justifications often used to confine women to the domestic sphere.

Within this framework, individual worth is not assessed by personal achievements but is instead reduced to binary categories of sex. Patriarchal thinking enforces rigid gender roles, viewing sex as fixed and immutable, while rejecting gender fluidity. This ideology stifles women's development and potential, further exacerbated by social norms that dictate their behavior and restrict their agency (Chang 2019). The limited space for women to express themselves or pursue personal growth is

emblematic of the systemic oppression embedded in the patriarchal structure. The following extract illustrates this dynamic:

Madame matchmaker: We see in Mulan. When a wife serves her husband, she must be silent. **D6-S4**

Madame Matchmake: Dishonor to the Hua Family. They have failed to raise a good daughter. **D7-S5**

The extract **D7** happened as form of upset by Matchmaker because as explained in the context, Mulan rearrange the glass to flee the insect. Matchmaker is not thanking Mulan for her effort to help her, instead she is judged as dishonor to family because of disobedience act of her. She supposed to remain silent even there is terrible condition as stated in **D6**. The stereotypes build by patriarchal culture and oppressed women in all aspects of life. The position women in marriage positioned as subordinate who need to serve men (husband) in silent. They need to be silent no matter how the live of marriage happened. Even in the most uncomfortable condition related with abusive partner, women need to accept it in silence.

This study reveals a strong correlation between the narrative of *Mulan* and the historical context of the Northern Dynasties period (386–581 AD). During this transitional era in Chinese history, cultural representations predominantly emphasized male authority and dominance, which were widely accepted as normative and often framed as protective rather than oppressive. As Kim (2015) notes, this period was marked by political instability and frequent warfare—conditions that are echoed in the storyline of *Mulan*. In such a volatile environment, confining women to the private sphere was perceived as a protective strategy and a stabilizing force for families and society.

However, restricting women to domestic roles significantly limited their opportunities for development in the public sphere, including access to education and economic independence. This rigid division of labor reinforced women's dependency on men, both socially and economically. Within this patriarchal framework, women's compliance with male authority—whether rational or not—was normalized and often expected. As Beauvoir (1956) argues, women are not left behind due to a lack of capability, but rather because patriarchal structures systematically restrict their access to power, resources, and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates a compelling link between Chinese patriarchal ideology and the linguistic strategies employed in Disney's *Mulan* (2020) live-action adaptation. By analyzing speech acts and lexical patterns, the film reveals a structured hierarchy embedded in familial and societal interactions one that mirrors and perpetuates traditional patriarchal values. Power, in this context, is not merely

thematic; it is discursively constructed and legitimized through culturally loaded language, where metaphors and speech patterns reflect inherited social structures.

From a discourse analytical and cultural standpoint, *Mulan* serves as more than just entertainment. It becomes a vehicle of ideological transmission. As a dominant force in global media, Disney plays a pivotal role in shaping how gender and power are narrated, imagined, and internalized. Echoing findings from previous scholarship (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Tang, 2008), this research reaffirms that cinematic narratives have the capacity to both reinforce and subtly critique societal norms, especially when disseminated to a worldwide audience.

While *Mulan* is often lauded for its progressive portrayal of a female protagonist defying gender expectations, this analysis suggests that the film operates within a complex ideological terrain. Mulan's heroism, though inspiring, is anchored in filial duty—a virtue central to Confucian ethics—rather than a full rejection of patriarchal constraints. Her transgression of gender roles is framed not as rebellion, but as moral obligation, highlighting the intricate balance between resistance and reverence in traditional Chinese culture.

Ultimately, *Mulan* (2020) offers a layered representation of gender and cultural identity. It simultaneously critiques and reaffirms patriarchal narratives, inviting audiences to reflect on how language, power, and tradition intersect in the construction of social roles. By foregrounding these discursive mechanisms, this study contributes not only to critical media discourse but also to broader conversations on gender equity and cultural literacy underscoring the urgent need for audiences to engage critically with the stories that shape our collective consciousness.

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