

Writing Chinese America into words and images: Storytelling and retelling of the song of Mu Lan.

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Abstract

The story of the ancient woman warrior—Mulan—has attracted repeated attention in China and the United States. This paper explores how words and images of the recreated Mulan story work together to construct a Chinese American tale that not only captures the cultural heritage of ancient China, but also conveys possibilities for female empowerment in the context of storytelling for Asian American and Asian diaspora children. The discussion on Jeanne Lee's *The Song of Mu Lan* (1995) will be contextualized with Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Disney's animated film *Mulan* (1998).



Writing Chinese America into Words and Images: Storytelling and Retelling of *The Song of Mu Lan*

Lan Dong

The story of the cross-dressing woman warrior—Mulan¹—has been transmitted throughout China for hundreds of years. This motif also has attracted more and more attention in the United States in recent years and has been adapted into a number of children's books. This essay examines how words and images of the recreated Mulan story work together to construct a Chinese American tale that not only captures the cultural heritage of premodern China, but also conveys possibilities for female empowerment in the context of storytelling for Asian American and Asian diaspora children. In particular, the discussion focuses on an analysis of Jeanne M. Lee's bilingual picture book, *The Song of Mu Lan* (1995) on two levels: (1) how this work claims cultural origin, and (2) how the collaboration of written text and colored illustrations addresses a new agenda concerning female identity by retelling a classical legend. My point of departure includes the necessary contextualization of Lee's book with Maxine Hong Kingston's canonical work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976). Both women writers draw upon issues of female agency by negotiating a cultural past and engaging a bicultural present in the forms of children's literature and nonfiction² respectively. The analysis to follow compares Lee's book and Disney's animated feature film *Mulan* (1998), as well as the picture books that were published as a companion to the film and selected texts for children published in Asia in the 1990s. By using these juxtapositions, I examine the strength of and effective strategies for representing Chinese America for the diaspora children in Lee's work and discuss the need for stories that retell Mulan's legend in the context of the diaspora to address cultural origin and at the same time to stress subjective female identity.



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