



Adaptation as Translation: The Representation and Reception of “The Ballad of Mulan” in the Anglophone World

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ABSTRACT

“The Ballad of Mulan”, a well-known ancient Chinese poem recording the story of Mulan who took the place of her aged father to enlist in the army by disguising herself as a man, has been translated many times into English, both interlingually and intersemiotically. The various versions are not dominated by faithfully translated texts but by adaptations represented by Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Disney’s animation *Mulan* (1998). To further learn about the dissemination of “The Ballad of Mulan” outside of China, this research examines its adaptations and their reception in the anglophone world. Recognizing adaptation as translation by employing Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet’s concept of “equivalence” based on Christine Nord’s preservation-adaptation percentage in translation, this study employs a descriptive approach. It first gives a chronological list of the English adaptations of “Mulan” that fall into four major genres (including dramas, novels, picture books, and videogames). It then scrutinizes the features of these adaptations and summarizes three adaptation types. Finally it investigates the acceptance of “Mulan” adaptations of three kinds as per statistics collected from representative websites and mainstream media. It argues that the adaptations altering or fabricating parts of the original story outnumber those of other kinds and are generally the best received.

Keywords: Adaptation, anglophone world, reception, The Ballad of Mulan, translation



Introduction

“The Ballad of Mulan” (木兰辞, hereinafter “The Ballad”), a *yuefu* (Music Bureau 乐府) poem as well as a folk song believed to have been composed during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535 AD) in ancient China, is considered the earliest written record of the Chinese heroine Mulan. Since her father was too elderly to join the military campaigns against the nomadic Rouran people (the Tartars) and had no son to replace him, Mulan disguised herself as a man to enlist in the army. After establishing her merits on the battlefield, she declined the Emperor’s offer to be an official and returned home for a family reunion. It was only when Mulan re-clothed herself as a woman that her comrades-in-arms realized her female identity. Eulogizing the heroine’s filial piety to her father, bravery in fighting against the enemy, and loyalty to the country, this poem, having been passed down in both verbal and written forms from generation to generation throughout China, has also spread outside China through adaptation. In the 1970s, Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese American writer, rewrote the poem in the second chapter “White Tigers” of her novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976), which soon became high-profile in the United States after its release, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award and being praised as a top nonfiction book of the 1970s by *Time* magazine. Also based on the poem, Walt Disney Pictures produced *Mulan* (1998), an animated musical adventure film that not only caused a sensation in America but also promoted Mulan’s story to wider fame throughout the anglophone world. Following these two works, an abundance of Mulan-based adaptations seemed to boom in English-speaking countries, transforming Mulan from a Chinese legend to an international icon. As a result, many scholars have become aware of the English representation of “The Ballad” and have begun their research on the adaptations. Some of them have concentrated on Kingston’s transformation of Mulan in her writing from the perspectives of alterations to the plot and character (Zhang 1999). Others have concentrated on reasons for rewriting (Wei 1999) and on historicism (Feng 2003). Still others have looked at the animation *Mulan* from more diverse angles. For example, Yu (2001) thinks *Mulan* was created on the basis of thirteen motifs in “The Ballad”; Li (2007) believes the Disneyfied *Mulan* was produced to entertain the masses for commercial purposes; Tian and Xiong (2013) think of the film as a “cultural deformation” of the original poem; Qing (2018) holds that the written story of Mulan was imported to the US through “cultural filtering”. However, few scholars (Dong 2011) have talked about other anglicized “Mulan” adaptations, such as picture books and plays. Though much attention has been paid to the adaptations, little research has been conducted on their role in transferring the Chinese tale and culture across China’s border. Therefore, in order to delve deeper into the circulation of “The Ballad” in the English-speaking world, this article intends to investigate the genres, features and reception of its adaptations, with the idea of treating adaptation as translation.

1. Adaptation as Translation

1.1. The inextricable link between adaptation and translation

“Translation” and “adaptation” are never used separately and are analogous in their natures. Lefevere (2000, 235) takes translation as an obvious form of rewriting, which further includes other less obvious forms such as criticism, commentary, historiography, and the production of plays. Herein, a play’s production actually belongs to adaptation, which, like translation, is a subset of rewriting. Similarly, Krebs (2012, 42-43) draws a parallel between translation and adaptation, arguing that they are both interdisciplinary, that they discuss the (re)construction of cultures through rewriting, and that they relate to “the collaborative nature of such acts and the subsequent and necessary critique of notions of authorship”. As Venuti (2007, 29) says, translation plays a role as an interpretation that decontextualizes the source text (ST), requiring “the translator variously to dismantle, rearrange, and finally displace the chain of signifiers that make up the source text”, and adaptation detaches its prior materials (including literary, dramatic, or musical texts, nonfiction texts and visual forms) from their contexts to “initiate its inscription of an interpretation”. Moreover, both translation and adaptation are recontextualized, with the former producing a target text (TT) and the latter reconstructing something “much more extensive and complex because of the shift to a different, multidimensional medium with different traditions, practices, and conditions of production” (Venuti 2007, 30).

1.2. Previous discussions on adaptation as translation

Some theorists have concurrently explicitly and implicitly assumed adaptation as part of translation. Nida and Taber (1982, 134) state their points clearly, arguing that adaptation is equal to cultural translation, which is the job of pastors and teachers, in contrast to the linguistic translation that translators are in charge of. From the skopos perspective, Nord (1991, 32-33) claims that elements of the ST-in-situation can be either “preserved” or “adapted” to the target situation, so adaptation, as a relative quantity, exists in each translation. In a similar vein, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995, 31-39) view adaptation, together with borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, and equivalence, as a translation procedure, and add that adaptation is a situational equivalence and represents “the extreme limit of translation”.

In addition to these, others obliquely identify adaptation as a form of translation. Such a typical scholar is Even-Zohar (1990, 75), who elaborates upon the poly-system theory, saying that “it does not make sense to regard the penetration of a system A into a system B as ‘influence’, while regarding the reformulation of texts belonging to the same system A by system B as ‘translation’.” To put it another way, “penetration” is regarded by Even-Zohar as translation as well. There is no question that the adaptation of “The Ballad” allows Chinese literature to infiltrate western culture; consequently, its adaptation can undoubtedly be seen as “translation”. Compared with Even-Zohar, Toury (1980, 14) defines translation in a broader sense, regarding

two related discourses as the translation of one another, which substantiates that adaptation, as an associated discourse with the ST, is a translation of the original. Radó (1979, 193) classifies adaptation as pseudotranslation that combines translation with transposition. This view can prove adaptation’s translation identity from two perspectives: first, pseudotranslation is always a key topic that researchers in translation studies academia focus on, so adaptation should also be able to have an equal right to be discussed by these translation scholars; second, though not an “authentic translation” that requires a determinate ST-TT pair, pseudotranslation belongs to “translation” in a general sense, and so does adaptation.

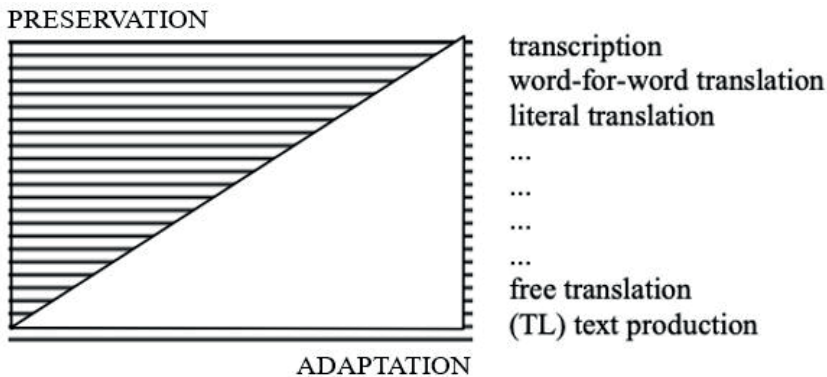
Apart from the theoretical arguments already indicated, there have been studies in which adaptation has been viewed as translation. Cattrysse (1992a, 1992b, 1997a, 1997b) is a pioneering academic who borrows the concepts of “systems” and “norms” respectively from Even-Zohar and Toury to study film adaptation as intersemiotic translation. Inspired by Cattrysse and also based on the ideas of Even-Zohar and Toury, Yau (2016) proposes a systemic model to analyze film adaptation with knowledge of translation with respect to contextualization and ideology. Still aiming to investigate film adaptation, Bartosch and Stuhlmann (2013), in a case study, examine two-phase adaptations as translations, including that of literary texts into comics and that of comics into films. Researchers that have analyzed the animation *Mulan* include Tian and Xiong (2013), Chai (2021) and Hsiung (2021), all of whom observe the film adaptation through the lens of translation. These earlier studies again justify the feasibility of exploring adaptation within the scope of translation.

1.3. Mapping “Mulan” adaptations onto equivalences

Built on Nord’s conception, this study assesses the English adaptations of “The Ballad” within the spectrum of “preservation and adaptation in translation” (Figure 1). As explained by Nord when talking about her concept of “functionality plus loyalty”, the translator should take both ST and TT into consideration and decide which aspects of ST should be preserved and which should be disregarded. To fulfill the TT’s skopos, those retained are faithfully translated and those abandoned are unfaithfully adapted, or even treacherously altered. From Figure 1 below, we can learn that translation based on 100% preservation (or 0% adaptation) is called “transcription” while that based on 0% preservation (or 100% adaptation) is regarded as “(target) text production”. Translations aiming for neither 100% preservation nor 100% adaptation are other kinds of translation, such as “literal translation” and “free translation”. Since adaptations of “The Ballad” are considered translations in this investigation, they surely can find corresponding places in Nord’s “translation” range. However, there are two obvious defects in Nord’s “translation” range: (1) only five translation types nearing the two poles (i.e., transcription, word-for-word translation, literal translation, free translation, (TL) text production) are shown in Figure 1, with others that fall in between being omitted; (2) Nord explains the preservation-adaptation rates of transcription and text production but does not detail those of other translation types. Moreover, it

is challenging to decide the preservation-adaptation rate for each adapted work in this research. To avoid ambiguity and make the analysis more persuasive, this study applies Vinay and Darbelnet's term of "(situational) equivalence" to replace Nord's classified "translations" and help match "Mulan" adaptations with distinct equivalences according to their estimated preservation (or adaptation) percentages. To be simple and clear, this research uses "P%" to represent the rate of preservation and "A%" to indicate that of adaptation. Through a quick analysis, three types of "Mulan" adaptations can be roughly categorized: (1) $P\% \approx A\%$ (readable) equivalence, (2) $P\% < A\%$ (reformational) equivalence, and (3) $P\% \ll A\%$ (innovational) equivalence, which will be further clarified in the fourth section.

Figure 1. Preservation and adaptation in translation (Nord 1991, 33)



2. Methodology

This article adopts a descriptive method to, firstly, brief the adaptations of four main genres in chronological order, secondly to analyze three types of equivalences, and lastly to observe their reception in English-speaking countries. To be more specific, informed by records provided by Lan Dong in her monograph *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (2011), the paper collects more material about "Mulan" adaptations and intends to present more detailed descriptions of the represented dramas, novels, picture books and videogames of "The Ballad". Then as per the collected materials, this research continues to reveal how they are translated and which equivalence category they should respectively fall into by referring to the preservation and adaptation percentages of the ST elements. Finally, the study accesses statistics from several rating sites (including Amazon, Goodreads and OCLC WorldCat) and a few mainstream media (including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) to learn about the audience's response to these Mulan works, as conducted by previous reception researchers (Wang and Quan 2015; Işıklar Koçak 2017; Liang and Xu 2018; Wang and Humblé 2020). In addition to describing the acceptance, a quantitative approach is applied in this section to visualize the divergent popularity.

3. English Adaptations of “The Ballad of Mulan”

As previously stated, “The Ballad” has been rendered into dramas, novels, picture books, and videogames. In this section of the paper we present a review of the history of English “Mulan” adaptation productions .

3.1. “Mulan” dramas

Among the plays adapted from “The Ballad”, the best known is Disney’s animation *Mulan* in 1998. However , the blockbuster was not the earliest “Mulan” drama produced in the anglophone world. As early as 1920, a severe famine struck northern China. Hearing the news, Peng Chun Chang 张彭春, a celebrated Chinese dramatist as well as an educationist, who was at that moment completing his doctorate at Columbia University in the US, contrived to raise a relief fund for his fellow countrymen struggling with hunger. In order to do this, Chang transformed “The Ballad” into an English play *Mu Lan*, invited his friend Shen Hung to act as the director, and staged the Chinese story at the Cort Theater, Broadway, in New York City in February 1921 (Roth 2018, 38). Unfortunately, though news of that performance is available, Chang’s initial script is nowhere to be found today; only the playbill and the first page of the script are now kept by the Harvard University Library (Huang 1995, 145). According to a scanned copy of *Mu Lan*’s playbill, the poem was translated into an eleven-episode stage production, with more than one scene in the fifth, sixth, eighth and tenth episodes. Another “Mulan” playwright active in America in the first half of the twentieth century was Hsi Tseng Tsiang 蒋希曾, a Chinese American who rewrote a three-act play *China Marches On* in 1938, renaming the protagonist Mulan as Mulan Chung. He reconstructed the ST as a story of Mulan Chung’s defense against the Japanese invaders in Shanghai, highlighting Mulan’s advocacy of class solidarity and gender equality, and calling on Chinese women to join the fight.

Five decades later, the artistically created cartoon *Mulan* came to the screen. The ST’s storyline was preserved in the film, which was enhanced by including additional characters (such as Mushu and Li Shang) and plots (for example, Mulan prayed for blessings in the ancestral temple). As a sequel to *Mulan*, *Mulan II* (2004) was released by the Japanese office of Disneytoon Studios, which, albeit in the name of “Mulan”, told the completely fabricated story of Mulan escorting three princesses to meet their soon-to-be Mongol fiancés for a marriage alliance after she married Li Shang. Subsequently, Disney expanded the 1998 *Mulan* into *Mulan Junior* (2010), a bigger musical being part of the Music Theatre International’s Broadway Junior series and featuring more battle sequences. Most recently, “The Ballad” was once again Disneyfied in the 2020 live-action *Mulan* directed by Niki Caro, which starred the Chinese American actress Crystal Liu (or Liu Yifei) as Mulan. Built on the 1998 version, this motion picture took in other elements, such as witchcraft and a special emphasis on the patriotism of soldiers.

Another animated adaptation of the English Mulan play, *The Secret of Mulan* (1998), was produced by Sterling Entertainment Group. Despite few comments about this film, it stands

out because all the characters are converted into insects, with Mulan becoming a caterpillar. The tale remained identical, except for Mulan's eventual return as a butterfly.

Throughout the 21st century, "The Ballad" was reproduced through English performances in various ways. In 2005, the faculty and students at the University of Warwick performed their self-composed *Mulan 2005*, wishing to introduce authentic and traditional Chinese culture to the audience (Warwick 2005). In 2012, the second season of the American fantasy adventure drama television series *Once Upon a Time* was aired, in which a new character, Hua Mulan, was played by Korean American Jamie Chung. As she was not the leading character, Mulan's story of joining the army was not referred to, but she was endowed with skills in martial arts, bravery, and prowess in battle, all of which were inherited from the ST story. Then in 2019, two children's stage plays premiered in the U.S. These were *The Ballad of Mulan* by Imagination Stage and *The Legend of Mulan* by ArtReach Touring Theatre.

3.2. "Mulan" novels

One critic stated that, "Although Mulan's story circulated in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, it was not widely known among English speakers until the 1976 publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*" (Dong 2011, 93-94). Unlike the dutiful daughter who joined the army in "The Ballad", Fa Mu Lan, the heroine in Kingston's novel, was portrayed as going into the mountains where she apprenticed to an old couple. Upon her return home she went to fight the baron's troop, reflecting her desire to be free of traditional female restraints. Moreover, Kingston's Fa Mu Lan did not serve the emperor but beheaded him instead, indicating the rebellion of women against a patriarchal society. This novel was not only the first but also the sole literary adaptation in the 20th century.

The new millennium has witnessed a proliferation of "Mulan" novels. Cameron Dokey published *The Wild Orchid: A Retelling of "The Ballad of Mulan"* in 2009, which preserved the plotline of the ST and added Mulan's love story with Prince Jian. As part of Disney's Twisted Tales series, Elizabeth Lim's work for children, *Reflection*, came out in 2018, which seemed to be a continuation of the cartoon *Mulan* (1998), narrating Mulan's journey to hell to retrieve the soul of her military fellow Li Shang who died after being seriously injured by Shan Yu. In the following year (2019), Sherry Thomas and Melanie Dickerson respectively produced two "Mulan" fiction books: *The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan*, which told about Mulan's revenge for his paralyzed father, and *The Warrior Maiden*, in which the author set Mulan in medieval Europe and replaced the Tartars in the ST with Teutonic knights. In 2020, three more "Mulan" tales were published. The first, *Mulan and the Jade Emperor* written by Vivienne Savage, told the story of how Mulan helped restore Prince Cheng to the throne usurped by his uncle. The second, *Mulan: Before the Sword* by Grace Lin, which claimed to be a prequel to the 2020 Disney's *Mulan*, narrated the tale of Mulan's epic journey for

her younger sister who had been bitten by a poisonous spider. During the journey she was informed of her future by the immortals. The third book, *Mulan* by Elizabeth Rudnick, was a mere transcript of the 2020 film of the same name.

3.3. “Mulan” picture books

In comparison to the other three genres, the number of “Mulan” picture books is the greatest, thanks largely to the Walt Disney Company, who recruited a team of adaptors and illustrators to create a series of picture books as merchandise for the 1998 *Mulan* so as to finally boost revenue. Some of them were transcribed directly from the animation, while others, such as *Mulan’s Lunar New Year* (2018), *Explore China: A Mulan Discovery Book* (2019), *Before the Story: Mulan’s Secret Plan* (2020) and *Mulan’s Happy Panda* (2020), were recreated from the ground up, with nothing resembling “The Ballad” but the heroine. Disney is not the only publisher of “Mulan” illustrated books. Other books not published by Disney include *The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China* (1992), *Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia* (1996), *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998), *Mulan Dominoes Starter Level 250 Headwords* (2004), *Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior* (2019), and *First Stories: Mulan* (2020). After a comparative analysis between these texts and “The Ballad”, it is clear that they were all “translated” from the ST with no conspicuous difference in the original plots.

3.4. “Mulan” videogames

The rewriting of Mulan in videogames seems to have been neglected in previous studies. Games are an ideal and novel medium for indirectly translating cultures today. Though there is no game tailored for Mulan, “The Ballad” has been represented as different functions in the games. In the Land of Dragons of *Kingdom Heart II* (2006), Fa Mulan’s mission is simply to replace her father in joining the army. In *Smite* (2014), Mulan appears as a goddess, symbolizing mankind’s infinite potential, which derives from Mulan’s valiant image in the ST. In addition to these, Mulan is also a component of *Civilization VI* (2016) and *Goddess of Genesis* (2018), in both of which the ST is condensed into background information that pops up when players click on the figure before the games start.

4. Measuring “Mulan” adaptations with equivalences

As mentioned in the previous section, “The Ballad” has been rewritten in abundant forms, with no two versions alike. However, by virtue of Nord’s preservation-adaptation percentages, we can still sort them into three equivalences that were put forward earlier.

4.1. P%≈A% (readable) equivalence

Among these three equivalences, “P%≈A% equivalence” closely matches a “real” faithful translation in which every Chinese character of the ST can find its counterpart. “Mulan”

adaptations of this kind include the majority of non-Disney-made picture books, such as *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998) by Robert D. San Souci (author), Jean and Mou-Sein Tseng (illustrators). Here is a comparison of three excerpts, respectively, from the ST, from the word-for-word translation by Hans H. Frankel, and from the picture book adaptation by San Souci.

ST: 昨夜见军帖·可汗大点兵·军书十二卷·卷卷有爷名。(Guo 1998, 374)

TT (by Frankel): *Last night I saw the draft posters,
The Khan is calling many troops,
The army list is in twelve scrolls,
On every scroll there is Father's name.* (Frankel 1976, 69)

TT (by San Souci):

While Elder Sister shopped, Mulan crossed the market to where an anxious crowd studied twelve scrolls pasted to a wall.

"What are these?" Mulan asked.

"They list the men who must serve in the Khan's army," a woman answered.

Mulan gasped when she recognized one name. "My fathers!" she cried. "But he is too old and weak to fight."

"If a man does not report to the Khan's army," the woman said, "he and his family will be punished." (San Souci 1998, 3)

It is not difficult to find that San Souci et al. enriched the adaptation text's substance with extra scene descriptions and made it more reader-friendly by involving conversations. To help the audience visualize the story, the illustrator(s) drew a picture of the market next to the text, where a throng was gathering in front of a bulletin wall and a woman nestling a baby in her arms was chatting with Mulan. According to the taxonomy of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translations by Jakobson (2000, 114), in the making of this book, the adaptor first read the Chinese ST and did an intralingual translation in his mind, and then expressed his thoughts interlingually in English. Afterwards, referring to the author's words, the two illustrators collaborated to finish the paintings so as to intertextualize them with the text, which is an intersemiotic translation. If we evaluate this kind of adaptation by Nord's Figure 1, an estimated 50% preservation (or approximately 50% adaptation) may be a possible result, because, when producing an adaptation, the adaptors are simultaneously translating the ST and augmenting their own ideas. This example reveals that the "P%≈A% equivalence" does not mean that a new story is told, but that the aim is to achieve a cognitively and visually more readable effect by recognizing "The Ballad" as the ST, as is testified to in the "Author's Note" (San Souci 1998).

4.2. P%<A% (reformational) equivalence

A big characteristic that differentiates “Mulan” adaptations of this equivalence from those of the first kind is that they change certain parts of the plot of the ST or completely fabricate some parts. The works of the four genres featuring this equivalence type are represented by Disney’s 1998 animation *Mulan* and 2020 live-action *Mulan*. Since the 1998 version has been thoroughly talked about in other studies (Yu 2001; Tian and Xiong 2013; Chai 2021; Hsiung 2022), the 2020 one is selected for discussion in this section. On the one hand, the order of the events in the plot appears to have been reorganized by the production crew. For example, in the ST, Mulan disclosed her female identity after she was back from the battlefield. However, in *Mulan* (2020), this part takes place during the battle in which she fights alongside her peer soldiers against the enemy. On the other hand, as has already been said, many fresh elements were blended with the ST in the movie. For instance, marriage-related topics were not covered by the ST, but in the film Mulan was asked by her father to meet an old matchmaker, who was an expert in training girls to become elegant ladies, in order to bring honor back to the Hua family. Another example is the witch who is acted by the Chinese Singaporean actress Gong Li. She was never a character in the ST but appeared in the movie as Shan Yu’s accomplice to intrude into the Central Plains region and attack Mulan as well as her companions. Though the two films were both inspired by and based on the Chinese ballad, Disney seemed to deliberately conceal their source and schemes to Disneyfy and Americanize Mulan. This adaptation mostly contains intersemiotic translation and the film (re-)creation predominates over the preservation of ST’s essence as an inspiration.

Some other adaptations, including *Mulan II* (2004) by Disneytoon Studios, *Reflection* (2018) by Elizabeth Lim and *Mulan: Before the Sword* (2020) by Grace Lin, are likewise characterized by this “P%<A% equivalence”. They claim to be either the prequel or sequel to the cartoon *Mulan* (1998). Thus, one thing that distinguishes *Mulan* (1998) from the above three is that it is based on “The Ballad”, whereas the three are derivatives of the animation. To rephrase, these three adaptations accentuate the fabrication while downplaying the “The Ballad”, yet the protagonist Mulan remains invariably the brave Chinese girl from the ST to TTs. To sum up, the ST was interlingually converted into Mulan’s personality or background knowledge in the new story.

4.3. P%<<A% (innovational) equivalence

The “P%<<A% equivalence”, an extreme variant of the “P<A equivalence”, turns “The Ballad” into an “intellectual property (IP)”. In other words, in adaptations of this kind Mulan is never a Chinese woman but rather an English prototype which everybody may use to create their own “Ballads of Mulan”. Accordingly, only a small portion of the ST is represented in the TT, which is why the mathematical symbol “<<” denoting “far less than” is employed here to indicate the quantitative relationship between preservation and adaptation in works of this

equivalence. Dramas such as *China Marches On* (1938) and *The Secret of Mulan* (1998), and novels, including *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *The Warrior Maiden* (2019) and *Mulan and the Jade Emperor* (2020), fall into this category.

Unlike the adaptations of “P%<A% equivalence”, those featuring “P%<<A%” developed their new heroines by merely borrowing the name of the ST’s Mulan and reconstructed the IP of Mulan’s taking the place of her father to join the army. Let us make a comparison of the ST and TTs of this equivalence type in Table 1.

Table 1. A Storyline Comparison of the ST and TTs	
TT \ ST	Mulan took the place of her father to join the army and defended her people against the Rouran people (the Tartars).
<i>China Marches On</i> (1938)	Mulan Chung, an ordinary woman, joined the army to fight against the Japanese invaders.
<i>The Secret of Mulan</i> (1998)	Mulan, a female caterpillar, replaced her aged father to join the army against the insect enemies.
<i>The Woman Warrior</i> (1976)	Mulan became an apprentice to an old couple and returned to behead the emperor by way of seeking revenge for her paralyzed father.
<i>The Warrior Maiden</i> (2019)	Mulan, an adopted daughter of poor parents, enlisted in the army to avoid marrying a butcher and fought against the Teutonic knights.
<i>Mulan and the Jade Emperor</i> (2020)	Taking the place of her ailing father, Mulan enlisted in the army to defend her people against northern beasts of men and to help Prince Cheng take back the throne from his uncle.

It is noticeable that the ST’s storyline piqued the adaptors’ interest and was somehow altered. As a result, “The Ballad” was transformed into the synopsis of these adaptations through interlingual translation and/or intersemiotic translation.

Furthermore, all “Mulan” videogames are also adaptations of this equivalence. Take *Smite* (2014) as an example, where the ST is translated as her lore on the game’s Wikipedia website. The original poem is interlingually sketched as follows:

China was invaded and a man from every family was called to serve in the army. But her father was old and her brother a child, and so for love’s sake, she set aside her loom and went to war in their place. She disguised herself as a young man, and no one was the wiser; for her father had trained her in the ways of the bow and the blade, making her the equal of any man in the army. For twelve years, she maintained the pretence. She fought well against the enemies of China, attaining rank and the loyalty of her fellow soldiers. She led men into battle more than once, setting herself where the fighting was thickest so that those who followed her might see her and take heart. At the end of those twelve years, she was offered a high rank, but turned it down. Instead, having grown tired of war, she asked only that she might return home to her family. And so she did, her duty complete.¹

1 <https://smite.fandom.com/wiki/Mulan>

This paragraph is a faithful retelling of the ST, but this rewriting does not stand for the whole game but only for the introduction of one character. Thus, the ST ended up being but a small part of the game. Be that as it may, the story of Mulan is circulated to every player through this “translation”.

5. The Reception of “Mulan” Adaptations in the Anglophone World

Since 1921 when Peng Chun Chang finished his script of *Mu Lan*, a whole century has witnessed the growing adaptability of “The Ballad”. Given the abundance of the rewritings, one could ask how the circulation of these adaptations is making an impact on the anglophone world? Since the adaptations are presented primarily in the form of books (including novels and illustrated books), this section first examines the library collections and reader acceptance of book adaptations. As for the movies and TV series among the plays and videogames, the research investigates the audience and players’ ratings. And the rest, including Peng Chun Chang’s *Mu Lan* (1921) and Hsi Tseng Tsiang’s *China Marches On* (1938), are discussed on the basis of the reviews of some mainstream media in English-speaking countries.

5.1. Library holdings and online ratings of “Mulan” book adaptations

OCLC WorldCat, the largest library catalog in the world, is used in this present research to measure the holdings of 20 book adaptations, including the “Mulan” novels and picture books. The collected data² is presented in Table 2. The ranking reveals that Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) overwhelmingly tops the collection with its data exceeding the second place by 1,562. The remaining three works of the top four are *Reflection* (2018), *Mulan: Before the Sword* (2020), and *The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan* (2019), with their figures all higher than 600. In contrast, 7 volumes did not gain much favor from the libraries, with no reader borrowing the book at the bottom of the list, which was *Mulan and the Jade Emperor* (2020). It is worth noticing that adaptations featuring “P%<A% equivalence”, which account for most of these 20 books, are generally more welcome than those of the other two equivalences, but some “P%<<A%” and “P%≈A%” adaptations, such as *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998), are still able to rise to prominence.

Book Names (novels and picture books)	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	OCLC WorldCat Library Holdings	Library Holding Rankings
<i>The Woman Warrior</i>	P%<<A%	2,287	1
<i>Reflection</i>	P%<A%	725	2
<i>Mulan: Before the Sword</i>	P%<A%	681	3

2 All the data involved in this research were assessed on 10 December, 2021.

Table 2. The Ranking of “Mulan” Book Collections on OCLC WorldCat

Book Names (novels and picture books)	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	OCLC WorldCat Library Holdings	Library Holding Rankings
<i>The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan</i>	P%<A%	613	4
<i>Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	393	5
<i>Disney's Mulan</i>	P%<A%	331	6
<i>Mulan's Happy Panda</i>	P%<A%	330	7
<i>Mulan's Lunar New Year</i>	P%<A%	284	8
<i>Before the Story: Mulan's Secret Plan</i>	P%<A%	273	9
<i>The Wild Orchid: A Retelling of "The Ballad of Mulan"</i>	P%<A%	261	10
<i>Mulan</i> (picture book)	P%<A%	248	11
<i>Mulan</i> (novel)	P%<A%	235	12
<i>Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	218	13
<i>Explore China: A Mulan Discovery Book</i>	P%<A%	80	14
<i>The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China</i>	P%≈A%	79	15
<i>Mulan (Dominoes Starter Level 250 Headwords)</i>	P%≈A%	78	16
<i>The Warrior Maiden</i>	P%<<A%	48	17
<i>First Stories: Mulan</i>	P%≈A%	26	18
<i>Hua Mulan: China's Sweetest Magnolia</i>	P%≈A%	17	19
<i>Mulan and the Jade Emperor</i>	P%<<A%	0	20

Although the library holdings can, to some extent, demonstrate the reception of each book among book borrowers, this index is potentially limited because it cannot apparently indicate English readers' comments. Thus, it is still necessary to refer to other data sources. As two of the world's largest online book marketplaces and leading book review websites, Amazon Books and Goodreads provide this study with some raw data, including Amazon Book Ratings (ABR), The Number of Amazon Book Reviewers (NABR), Goodreads Ratings (GR) and The Number of Goodreads Reviewers (NGR), which are all displayed below. Since Amazon and Goodreads both function in a similar way as sources of book reviewing websites, this research attempts to combine their data by generating two additional indexes, Average Reviewer Ratings (ARR) and The Number of Total Reviewers (NTR), according to two formulas: (1) $ARR = (ABR \times NABR + GR \times NGR) / (NABR + NGR)$; (2) $NTR = NABR + NGR$. Correspondingly and consequently, two rankings, Average Rating Rankings (AVRR) and Rankings of the Number of Total Reviewers (RNTR), are obtained. These four groups of processed data are also shown in Table 3 and Table 4. ARR can suggest a book's readability (to what degree the reviewers recommend the book to potential readers), while NTR tells how many readers have

read the book, or in other words, the width with which the book is received. We can easily see from Table 3 and Table 4 that *Disney’s Mulan* (1998) and *The Woman Warrior* (1976) are respectively the top-recommended and most-reviewed books, and that, at the same time, *Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia* (1996) ranks as the least readable and the least welcomed book. Within the top 10 of Table 3, aside from 7 books of “P%<A% equivalence”, *Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior* (2019) of “P%≈A% equivalence” and *Mulan and the Jade Emperor* (2020) of “P%<<A% equivalence” are respectively ranked in 5th and 9th place, with the former scoring 4.34 and the latter 4.25. In contrast, more books of “P%≈A% equivalence” and “P%<<A% equivalence” make it into the top-10 list of Table 4, with some even overtaking those of “P%<A% equivalence”. More specifically, two “P%<<A% equivalence” books, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *The Warrior Maiden* (2019), are ranked in 1st and 4th place, with the former reviewed 29,660 times and the latter 3,253 times, while another two “P%≈A% equivalence” books, *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998) and *Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior* (2019), are ranked as 8th and 9th.

Table 3. The Rankings of Average Ratings of “Mulan” Books on Amazon and Goodreads

Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	ABR ³	NABR	GR ⁴	NGR	ARR ⁵	AVRR
<i>Disney’s Mulan</i>	P%<A%	4.2	14	4.95	65	4.82	1
<i>Before the Story: Mulan’s Secret Plan</i>	P%<A%	4.8	161	4.17	77	4.6	2
<i>Mulan</i> (novel)	P%<A%	4.6	36	4	5	4.53	3
<i>Mulan: Before the Sword</i>	P%<A%	4.8	215	4.29	687	4.41	4
<i>Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	4.9	76	4.12	192	4.34	5
<i>Mulan</i> (picture book)	P%<A%	4.7	365	3.97	386	4.32	6
<i>Mulan’s Lunar New Year</i>	P%<A%	4.8	72	4.04	158	4.28	7
<i>Explore China: A Mulan Discovery Book</i>	P%<A%	4.4	14	3.75	4	4.26	8
<i>Mulan and the Jade Emperor</i>	P%<<A%	4.6	88	4.04	142	4.25	9
<i>Reflection</i>	P%<A%	4.8	3,314	4.01	10,044	4.21	10
<i>Mulan (Dominoes Starter Level 250 Headwords)</i>	P%≈A%	4.6	23	3.98	49	4.18	11
<i>The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan</i>	P%<A%	4.6	205	4.11	2,903	4.14	12
<i>Mulan’s Happy Panda</i>	P%<A%	4.9	26	3.27	26	4.09	13

3 The full rating on Amazon Book is 5.0.

4 The full rating on Goodreads is 5.0.

5 The figures for ARR are rounded to 2 decimal places.

Table 3. The Rankings of Average Ratings of “Mulan” Books on Amazon and Goodreads

Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	ABR ³	NABR	GR ⁴	NGR	ARR ⁵	AVRR
<i>The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China</i>	P%≈A%	4.6	27	3.59	32	4.05	14
<i>The Warrior Maiden</i>	P%<<A%	4.6	327	3.94	2,926	4.01	15
<i>First Stories: Mulan</i>	P%≈A%	4.2	26	2.75	4	4.01	16
<i>Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	4.6	27	3.83	327	3.89	17
<i>The Wild Orchid: A Retelling of “The Ballad of Mulan”</i>	P%<A%	4.6	109	3.87	6,231	3.88	18
<i>The Woman Warrior</i>	P%<<A%	4.3	795	3.72	28,865	3.74	19
<i>Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia</i>	P%≈A%	4.0	1	3.63	8	3.67	20

Table 4. The Rankings of the Average Number of “Mulan” Book Reviewers

Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	NABR	NGR	NTR	RNTR
<i>The Woman Warrior</i>	P%<<A%	795	28,865	29,660	1
<i>Reflection</i>	P%<A%	3,314	10,044	13,358	2
<i>The Wild Orchid: A Retelling of “The Ballad of Mulan”</i>	P%<A%	109	6,231	6,340	3
<i>The Warrior Maiden</i>	P%<<A%	327	2,926	3,253	4
<i>The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan</i>	P%<A%	205	2,903	3,108	5
<i>Mulan: Before the Sword</i>	P%<A%	215	687	902	6
<i>Mulan</i> (picture book)	P%<A%	365	386	751	7
<i>Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	27	327	354	8
<i>Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	76	192	268	9
<i>Before the Story: Mulan’s Secret Plan</i>	P%<A%	161	77	238	10
<i>Mulan’s Lunar New Year</i>	P%<A%	72	158	230	11
<i>Mulan and the Jade Emperor</i>	P%<<A%	88	142	230	12
<i>Disney’s Mulan</i>	P%<A%	14	65	79	13
<i>Mulan</i> (Dominoes Starter Level 250 Headwords)	P%≈A%	23	49	72	14
<i>The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China</i>	P%≈A%	27	32	59	15
<i>Mulan’s Happy Panda</i>	P%<A%	26	26	52	16
<i>Mulan</i> (novel)	P%<A%	36	5	41	17
<i>First Stories: Mulan</i>	P%≈A%	26	4	30	18

Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	NABR	NGR	NTR	RNTR
<i>Explore China: A Mulan Discovery Book</i>	P%<A%	14	4	18	19
<i>Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia</i>	P%≈A%	1	8	9	20

To make this research even more compelling, the book sales rankings on Amazon are also analyzed because this metric can reflect how popular the books as merchandise are in the eyes of customers. As shown in Table 5, *Reflection* (2018) and *Mulan: Before the Sword* (2020) rank within the first 100,000, indicating their exceptional reception from another angle. Inconsistent with the ranking in Table 4, the earliest published book *The Woman Warrior* (1976) that has thus far attracted the most readers to review it online is just ranked in 14th place, presumably because of its outdatedness. Another factor that deserves attention is that *Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia* (1996) again performs the worst in Table 5. Moreover, the adaptations of the “P%<A% equivalence”, without a doubt, dominate this ranking; by contrast, the books of the other two equivalences are mainly concentrated within the bottom 10, except for *The Warrior Maiden* (2019).

No.	Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	Amazon Book Sales Ranking
1	<i>Reflection</i>	P%<A%	34,815
2	<i>Mulan: Before the Sword</i>	P%<A%	79,473
3	<i>Mulan</i> (novel)	P%<A%	121,072
4	<i>The Warrior Maiden</i>	P%<<A%	128,325
5	<i>Mulan’s Happy Panda</i>	P%<A%	160,002
6	<i>Before the Story: Mulan’s Secret Plan</i>	P%<A%	164,354
7	<i>The Wild Orchid: A Retelling of “The Ballad of Mulan”</i>	P%<A%	222,201
8	<i>The Magnolia Sword: A Ballad of Mulan</i>	P%<A%	254,547
9	<i>Mulan</i> (picture book)	P%<A%	430,389
10	<i>Mulan’s Lunar New Year</i>	P%<A%	575,090
11	<i>First Stories: Mulan</i>	P%≈A%	612,847
12	<i>Mulan: The Legend of the Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	735,821
13	<i>The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China</i>	P%≈A%	1,537,940
14	<i>The Woman Warrior</i>	P%<<A%	1,550,869
15	<i>Mulan and the Jade Emperor</i>	P%<<A%	1,842,612
16	<i>Explore China: A Mulan Discovery Book</i>	P%<A%	1,855,886
17	<i>Mulan</i> (Dominoes Starter Level 250 Headwords)	P%≈A%	1,984,009

No.	Book Names	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	Amazon Book Sales Ranking
18	<i>Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior</i>	P%≈A%	2,088,098
19	<i>Disney’s Mulan</i>	P%<A%	5,428,450
20	<i>Hua Mulan: China’s Sweetest Magnolia</i>	P%≈A%	6,862,508

5.2. The online ratings of the “Mulan” play and videogame adaptations

Only five of the seven “Mulan” dramas are examined in this part because the remaining two, *Mu Lan* (1921) and *China Marches On* (1938), are inaccessible today and hence have no online ratings. The statistics in Table 6 are collected from Rotten Tomatoes, a famous website for rating plays, and where “Tomatometer” and “Audience Score” are two metrics, the former determined by professional critics and the latter by the mass audience.

No.	Play Name	Adaptation (Equivalence) Type	Tomatometer	Reviewers’ Number	Audience Score	Audiences’ Number
1	<i>Once Upon a Time (Season 2)</i>	P%<<A%	100%	6	89%	534
2	<i>Mulan</i> (1998 animation)	P%<A%	86%	78	85%	250,000+
3	<i>Mulan</i> (2020 live-action)	P%<A%	73%	317	47%	10,000+
4	<i>Mulan II</i>	P%<A%	0%	5	42%	50,000+
5	<i>The Secret of Mulan</i>	P%<<A%	N/A	0	33%	2

Regardless of their different graders, the two metrics show parallel levels of recognition. Among the five plays, *Once Upon a Time* (2012) received the highest evaluations, while *The Secret of Mulan* (1998) seems to have been under-appreciated by the public. In terms of the number of reviewers, *Mulan* (1998) has attracted the biggest collection of reviewers (250,000), suggesting its widest dissemination among these five dramas. Moreover, though *Once Upon a Time* (2012) tops this ranking, its rating has little to do with its representation of “The Ballad”, so *Mulan* (1998) is expected to be the best-received one. Generally speaking, “P%<A%” adaptations still perform better in this ranking.

The ratings of three “Mulan” videogames are retrieved from IGN (Imagine Games Network), a videogame review website run by IGN Entertainment, the parent company of Rotten Tomatoes.

No.	Game Names	Equivalence Type	IGN Ratings
1	<i>Civilization VI</i>	P%<<A%	9.4
2	<i>Smite</i>	P%<<A%	8.5
3	<i>Kingdom Hearts II</i>	P%<<A%	7.6

As is shown in Table 7, all the three games are adaptations of the “P%<<A% equivalence”, and *Civilization VI* (2016) is thought of as the best acknowledged one. What should be noted is that these ratings only showcase the games’ user experience instead of the players’ attitudes towards the figure Mulan. However, the higher a game’s rating is, the more likely new players will choose this game, and the more chances Mulan will have to advertise her story.

5.3. American mainstream media’s discussions on Mu Lan and China Marches On

Peng Chun Chang’s *Mu Lan* (1921) is not only the earliest English play but also the first adaptation based on “The Ballad”. Although this drama could not receive ratings from online viewers as Disney’s “Mulan” films, it was no less discussed in the English-speaking world in the 1920s. For example, *The New York Times*, a highly influential newspaper in the United States and in the world, reported several times about the play when it was staged. On February 24, 1921, an article titled “CHINESE TO ACT ‘MU LAN.’ Play at Cort Today and Friday for Famine” profiled playwright Peng Chun Chang, the director Shen Hung, the lead actress Eva Leewah, and a few celebrated box holders. On the next day, another longer article titled “CHINESE STUDENTS ACT PLAY FOR FAMINE FUND: Excel in an English Dramatization of ‘Mu Lan’, a Poem of the Sixth Century” highly praised the performance and gave a description of the play synopsis, the production background of “The Ballad”, as well as the stage props and costumes. Moreover, on March 11 of the same year, the newspapers again ran a short advertisement for *Mu Lan* (1921), aiming to encourage American citizens to watch the drama so as to raise relief funds for the Chinese famine victims. Other local media that covered *Mu Lan* (1921) include *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Washington Post*.

Likewise, Hsi Tseng Tsiang’s *China Marches On* (1938) drew American media’s attention. News items reporting on this drama appeared in *The New York Times* at least six times. On August 7, 1938, the “Latest Books Received” section recommended the script of *China Marches On* (1938) with the mention that it was a three-act play by Tsiang. Then, on November 8 of the same year, an article called “16 of Broadway’s 19 Shows to Mark Election with Matinee Performances Today” said that Tsiang’s drama, by the Chinese General Relief Fund Committee, would be performed in 1939. On April 17 of the following year, *The New York Times* published an advertisement to recruit actors and actresses for *China Marches On* (1938). On October 22, 1939, a newspaper article “A PLAYWRIGHT ON UNION SQUARE” was printed, telling the story of Tsiang’s inviting people to watch his drama in the square, which

helped increase the play's popularity. Another two mentions on March 5, 1943 and August 6, 1944, were also promotions for the drama. Though reports about *China Marches On* (1938) did not much serve as a way of introducing the live performance, they were sure to have brought many more spectators to the theatre.

Despite both being stage adaptations of "The Ballad", these two dramas belong to distinct equivalence categories. Chang's *Mu Lan* (1921), like Disney's cartoon *Mulan* (1998), though intersemiotically translated from the ST, adds the scriptwriter's own imagination of the heroine Mulan's romance with the hero Ho Tin Yu, so this adaptation should be of the "P%<A% equivalence". But Tsiang's *China Marches On* (1938) creates a story that only borrows Mulan's name as well as her personal character from the ST, which makes this adaptation feature "P%<<A% equivalence". In reviewing the news reports about these two performances, we can easily conclude that *Mu Lan* (1921) was better received by the English audience than *China Marches On* (1938) because the former was always placed in the center of discussion while the latter was simply mentioned to introduce the playwright Tsiang.

Conclusion

This research investigates the categories and reception of the English adaptations of "The Ballad of Mulan" by treating adaptation as translation. The research findings show that there are three adaptation types: P%≈A% (readable) equivalence, P%<A% (reformatory) equivalence and P%<<A% (innovational) equivalence, which, though dealt with in connection with the "Mulan" adaptation resource pool, are thought to apply universally to the adaptations of other literary works. This presumption, for sure, needs further examination and verification. This research also finds that the adaptations of "P%<A% equivalence" not only outnumber but are also more popular than those of the other two equivalences, yet sometimes the adaptation of "P%<<A% equivalence" may surprise the audience, presumably because of its unexpected brand-new setting or reformulated ideological value. Moreover, this study contributes to scholarship because it attempts to provide quantified and objective proof of reception, which has often been qualitative and subjective until now. Although this article is experimental, the new conception of adaptation and the innovative methodology used are expected to inspire future academics who would like to delve deeper into adaptation studies as well as reception studies.

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