Female Warriors in the MCU and Wuxia Films:
A Comparative Study

YE Wan-hua

School of Undergraduate Education, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China

This essay offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of female warriors in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Wuxia films. Both genres portray powerful and empowered female characters who defy societal expectations and embody resilience, effectively challenging gender norms and promoting female empowerment. However, despite their strength, many of these women warriors face certain narrative factors, such as the male gaze and a predetermined fate, which can restrict their agency and curtail their full potential. And it is within the realm of Wuxia films that the captivating element of cross-dressing among female warriors emerges, providing a nuanced exploration of identity and the constraints imposed by society.

Keywords: female warriors, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Wuxia films, strength and agency, male gaze, predetermined fate, cross-dressing

Introduction

Both the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Wuxia films are renowned for their captivating action sequences, visually stunning spectacle, and immense popularity in the global film market. As action films, they guarantee high box office success (Leung & Shi, 2023) and offer audiences an immersive and entertaining experience through impressive technical craftsmanship and intense combat scenes (Jia, 2003). Notably, both cinematic realms feature strong and empowered female characters who defy traditional gender norms and play significant roles in the narrative. These female warriors transcend societal expectations, challenging the notion that women are confined to passive or supporting roles, and inspire audiences with their courage, determination, and unwavering commitment to justice.

Despite the significance of these female warriors, a comprehensive comparison between the two film realms has been notably absent. This essay aims to explore the similarities and differences in the portrayal of female warriors, the challenges they face, and the empowering narratives surrounding them in both the MCU and Wuxia films. Through a critical examination, it will shed light on the depiction of female warriors in these cinematic realms, focusing on themes of empowerment, containment, and the significance of cross-dressing within the Wuxia genre. By examining these aspects, this study contributes to the scholarly discourse surrounding gender, cinema, and cultural studies, enhancing our understanding of the diverse approaches to portraying female

YE Wan-hua, master degree, Associate Professor, School of Undergraduate Education, Shenzhen Polytechnic University.

characters and the broader implications for gender representation and empowerment within the realm of popular cinema.

Breaking the Traditional Gender Norm: Strength and Agency of Female Warriors

Within both MCU and Wuxia films, female warriors consistently demonstrate exceptional physical prowess and combat skills, showcasing their ability to overcome formidable challenges. These empowered characters not only challenge traditional gender norms but also serve as symbols of resilience, courage, and determination (Ma & Lu, 2017). By defying societal expectations and excelling in traditionally male-dominated domains, these female warriors break barriers and inspire audiences. Their presence in these narratives sends a powerful message of inclusivity, highlighting the importance of gender equality and representation. Moreover, their pursuit of justice and their unwavering commitment to defending the innocent and upholding social justice further solidify their roles as empowering figures. By utilizing their skills and abilities to fight against oppression and injustice, these female warriors become catalysts for change and embody the transformative potential of empowered women.

MCU Superheroines: Prowess, Depth of Characterization, and Inclusivity

MCU superheroines is "a far cry from the traditionally passive roles offered to women" (Brown, 2011, p. 7). They embody exceptional prowess, challenging the notion that women are less capable than their male counterparts. These characters showcase immense physical strength, agility, and combat skills, proving that women can be formidable fighters and superheroes. Whether it's Captain Marvel's cosmic powers, Black Widow's mastery of martial arts, or Scarlet Witch's reality-altering abilities, these superheroines demonstrate their extraordinary capabilities and serve as powerful symbols of female empowerment. By showcasing their prowess, the MCU breaks down the stereotype that women are inherently weaker or less skilled in physical combat, providing audiences with inspiring role models and expanding the possibilities of female characters in the superhero genre.

Another crucial aspect of the superheroines is the depth of their characterization which sets them apart from other action females and contributes to a more engaging and relatable viewing experience. By going beyond their physical abilities, these superheroines are presented as multi-dimensional individuals with complex emotions, personal struggles, and motivations. Through the exploration of their inner worlds, the MCU allows audiences to connect with these characters on a deeper level, fostering a greater investment in their journeys and narratives. This approach aligns with the principles of character development in storytelling, where well-rounded and multi-dimensional characters are more likely to evoke empathy and resonate with audiences. By delving into the complexities of their emotions and personal struggles, MCU superheroines transcend the superficiality often associated with action females, providing a compelling and nuanced portrayal that enhances the overall storytelling and viewer engagement.

Inclusivity is another fundamental aspect of the MCU's approach to superheroines. The universe features diverse female characters from various backgrounds, ethnicities, and experiences. This commitment to inclusivity helps to break down barriers and stereotypes, providing representation for women from different cultural and societal perspectives. The superheroines in the MCU not only inspire audiences who identify with their experiences but also promote a broader understanding and appreciation of diverse female voices and

narratives. This inclusivity extends beyond gender, as the MCU also features LGBTQ+ representation, ensuring that marginalized communities see themselves reflected in these empowering roles. A prominent instance of LGBTQ+ representation within the MCU is evident in the character of Valkyrie, featured in "Thor: Ragnarok" and subsequent films, where the character's bisexuality has been confirmed, contributing a significant aspect to her overall development (Willingham, 2019). By embracing diversity and inclusivity, the MCU superheroines contribute to a more inclusive and representative cinematic landscape, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment for audiences worldwide.

Female Warriors in Wuxia Films: Strength, Chivalry, and Inner grace

Female Wuxia Warriors are renowned for their exceptional strength, embodying a physical prowess that enables them to engage in intense martial arts combat. For example, in the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," the character Yu Shu Lien showcases her extraordinary physical abilities as she effortlessly executes complex sword techniques and engages in gravity-defying fight sequences. Her strength and agility break gender expectations, challenging the notion that women are inherently weaker in combat. Through her impressive display of physical prowess, she inspires audiences with her skill and determination, breaking traditional gender norms in the process.

In addition to their physical strength, Female Wuxia Warriors embody the principles of chivalry deeply rooted in the Wuxia tradition (Yang, 2006) Chivalry in Wuxia films embodies honor, righteousness, and protection of the weak. It guides the actions of heroes who uphold moral values, demonstrate martial prowess, and prioritize loyalty and filial piety. A notable example can be found in the film "Hero," where the character Flying Snow demonstrates her adherence to chivalric ideals. She displays unwavering loyalty to her lover and fellow warrior, Broken Sword, and acts with righteousness to protect their honor and the greater cause. Her actions reflect the chivalrous values of honor, integrity, and a commitment to justice, as she engages in battles not solely for personal gain but to uphold noble principles. By embodying chivalry, Flying Snow challenges societal expectations and redefines the concept of heroism for female characters in Wuxia films.

Beyond their physical strength and adherence to chivalry, Female Wuxia Warriors possess an inner grace that sets them apart. In the film "House of Flying Daggers," the character Xiao Mei exemplifies this inner grace. Despite facing numerous trials and betrayals, Xiao Mei maintains a sense of resilience and emotional depth. Her ability to adapt to challenging circumstances, make difficult decisions, and navigate complex relationships showcases her inner strength and wisdom. Xiao Mei's emotional intelligence allows her to forge deep connections with others, leading to profound character development and a portrayal that goes beyond mere physicality. Through her inner grace, Xiao Mei becomes a multidimensional character and an empowering figure for audiences.

Containing of Powerful Female Warriors

The depiction of these tough female warriors presents a complex dynamic in their struggle to escape conventional gender role expectations. While these characters initially challenge societal norms, their rebellion is often portrayed as temporary or incomplete, as they ultimately fall back into the constraints of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and class. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of the male gaze and predetermined destinies. As Mencimer astutely observed: "Women are still only allowed to be violent within certain parameters

largely proscribed by what men are willing to tolerate" (2001). This limitation underscores the enduring influence of patriarchal structures in shaping the representation of female warriors in various forms of media, including both Wuxia films and the MCU.

Male Gaze

The world of action movies reveals a conspicuous sexual imbalance. In stark contrast to the displays of muscularity and overt masculinity exhibited by their male counterparts in combat, many female warriors find themselves consistently subjected to the gaze of male viewers. This dominant male gaze projects its fantasies and desires onto the female form. Even amidst intense fighting scenes, numerous female warriors are depicted in ways that purposefully deliver a potent visual and erotic influence to captivate the audience. This spectacle, largely unrelated to the development of a storyline "at the expense of taking the strength of its female characters seriously" (Jones, 2022, p. 196), can be observed in characters such as Xiao Mei from "House of Flying Daggers" and Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Male gaze: Indispensable part in Wuxia Films

Male gaze is especially evident in the portrayal of some female warriors in Wuxia films. "House of Flying Daggers," for example, strategically caters to the male gaze, perpetuating the objectification of Xiao Mei's character. Throughout the movie, there are specific scenes that underscore the emphasis on her physicality and her appeal to male desires, further reinforcing her objectification. One such scene involves a sensual encounter between Xiao Mei and Jin, one of the male characters. In this scene, the camera lingers on their intimate moments, emphasizing their physical closeness and capturing Xiao Mei's alluring expressions. Although the scene aims to evoke a sense of eroticism, it primarily serves the purpose of captivating the male viewer, freezing the narrative's flow of action for moments of voyeuristic pleasure.

Another instance occurs during a dance sequence, where Xiao Mei's movements are choreographed to accentuate her grace and beauty. The camera fixates on her as she twirls and moves with elegance, amplifying the visual spectacle for the audience. While this scene showcases Xiao Mei's skill and artistry, it also reinforces her objectification, as her movements are designed to captivate and titillate the viewer rather than further the story or explore her character's inner complexities. As one critic astutely observes: "This scene reduces the traditional martial arts, dance, and calligraphy elements of Wuxia films to a blatant voyeuristic gaze upon the female body" (Xiao, 2018, p. 166).

Changing male gaze: Multifaceted female characters

In MCU, it is a different case. To some degree, the earlier movies of the MCU witnessed the objectification of certain superheroines through the male gaze in their portrayal. Black Widow is the case in point. In "Iron Man 2" and "The Avengers," the camera angles and framing frequently emphasized her physical attractiveness and focused on her form-fitting outfits, accentuating her curves. The scene in which she changes into her fight suit, unrelated to the flow of the narrative, obviously caters to the voyeuristic desire of the male viewers in and out of the screen. These visual choices placed a disproportionate emphasis on Black Widow's appearance, potentially overshadowing her character development and skills as a highly trained spy and fighter.

The portrayal of Wanda Maximoff, also known as Scarlet Witch, is also subjected to the influence of the male gaze, particularly in films like "Avengers: Age of Ultron" and "Captain America: Civil War." In these

movies, the camera often frames Wanda in ways that prioritize her attractiveness and physical appearance, frequently focusing on her figure, accentuating her curves, and highlighting her beauty. These visual choices can undermine her role as a powerful superhero by reducing her character to an object of desire for the male audience.

However, as the MCU has evolved and expanded, there has been a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female characters, moving away from the sole emphasis on their beauty and attractiveness. The focus now lies on their individual narratives and heroic contributions. Wanda Maximoff, for instance, as portrayed in films like "Avengers: Infinity War" and "Avengers: Endgame," has received a more nuanced and substantial character arc. Her emotional journey, powers, and moral dilemmas are explored in depth, showcasing her complexity as a character.

The most significant shift can be seen in the role of Black Widow. In later films like "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" and "Avengers: Endgame," her character was given more depth and agency. Her skills as a highly trained spy and fighter were highlighted, emphasizing her role as a formidable and respected member of the Avengers.

The exploration of Black Widow's origins provides crucial insights into her character, as it unravels the layers of her past and sheds light on the experiences that shaped her. This backstory helps inform the audience about her authentic emotions, particularly in relation to her "fake" family, which she had formed during her undercover assignments (Killian, 2021). The complexity of her actions becomes apparent as her past and present collide, forcing her to confront her conflicting loyalties and the weight of her past actions. The inclusion of Black Widow's intricate backstory serves to humanize her character and highlight her capacity for growth and redemption. It allows for a more differentiated portrayal of her as a flawed yet resilient individual, navigating the moral complexities of her past while striving to make amends and protect those she cares about.

Predetermined Destiny

The portrayal and fate of female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Wuxia films have often been subject to a troubling trend, where many of these characters face predetermined tragic destinies. This pattern perpetuates gendered stereotypes and restricts the potential for female characters to experience agency, growth, and long-lasting impact within the storylines. Despite attempts to provide more depth and empowerment to female characters, they continue to be subjected to narratives that ultimately lead to their demise.

Fridging of MCU superheroines

The prevalence of tragic destinies among MCU superheroines is a recurring pattern that warrants closer examination due to its implications for gender representation in popular media. While the MCU has made significant strides in diversifying its roster of superheroes and providing more prominent roles for women, the persistent trend of subjecting female characters to tragic fates raises concerns about the limited narratives available to them. This trend is exemplified by the sacrifices of Black Widow and Gamora respectively.

Black Widow sacrifices herself in "Avengers: Endgame" to retrieve the Soul Stone, a pivotal moment in the film's climactic battle against the villain Thanos. While her sacrifice is intended to be a heroic act, the narrative frames it as a tragic death. This outcome reinforces the notion that female characters are disposable and expendable, as their ultimate purpose is to serve the larger narrative or facilitate the growth of other characters, particularly male counterparts.

This portrayal of Black Widow's sacrifice exemplifies the trope known as "fridging," coined by Gail Simone (1999) in the world of comic books. The term refers to the act of killing off or harming a female character, often a love interest or close ally, in order to provide motivation or emotional development for a male protagonist. In the case of Black Widow, her sacrifice serves as a catalyst for the emotional journey of Clint Barton/Hawkeye, who is grappling with guilt and seeking redemption. By employing the "fridging" trope, the narrative positions Black Widow as a means to an end, reinforcing the notion that female characters exist primarily to propel the development of male characters rather than having agency and significance in their own right.

Similarly, Gamora meets a tragic end in "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2." Her adoptive father, Thanos, kills her as part of his quest for power. Her death serves as a turning point for the narrative, fueling the emotional journey and motivations of her male counterpart, Peter Quill/Star-Lord. Her demise is an integral part of Thanos' character development as well, emphasizing his ruthlessness and the lengths he is willing to go to achieve his goals. Again, it reinforces the trope of the "fridged woman," where a female character's death serves as a catalyst for the male protagonist's development or vengeance.

The recurring pattern of tragic destinies among Black Widow and Gamora demonstrates a broader issue within the MCU and superhero narratives at large. It suggests that women are inherently destined to suffer and be sacrificed, denying them the opportunities for personal triumph and long-lasting significance within the superhero genre. This reinforces traditional gender roles and limits the range of narratives available to female characters.

Tragic destinies of female warriors in Wuxia films

Within the realm of Wuxia films, the portrayal of female warriors often unfolds as a series of tragic destinies, where their narratives become intricate tapestries woven with themes of sacrifice and suffering. These cinematic works frequently reinforce and perpetuate traditional gender roles, effectively constraining the agency and autonomy of women within the storytelling framework. As these films transport viewers to martial arts-laden historical settings, the experiences of female characters become intertwined with societal expectations, relegating them to limited roles and denying them the opportunity to fully shape their own destinies. Two notable examples of such characters are Jen Yu from "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and Gong Er from "The Grandmaster."

In "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," Jen Yu, embodies the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. As a young woman from a noble family, Jen yearns for freedom and adventure, which drives her into a forbidden romance with the bandit Lo. However, her obligations to her family and the societal norms of her time compel her to conform and fulfill an arranged marriage. This internal struggle eventually leads to tragic consequences, as she becomes entangled in a series of events that result in pain and loss. As one critic claims: "when she finally chooses to fall off the cliff and take her own life, she also chooses to submit to the Chinese orthodox culture and traditional rituals, thus completely deconstructing her previous rebelliousness and individuality" (Cui, 2010, p. 13).

Jen Yu's character exemplifies the limitations placed upon women in Wuxia films. Despite her strong will and martial arts prowess, she is ultimately bound by the constraints of tradition and duty. Her agency is restricted, and her personal growth is stifled as she is forced to sacrifice her own desires for the sake of societal expectations.

In "The Grandmaster," Gong Er, "the collection of generations of chivalrous women" (Liu, 2014, p. 15), similarly faces a tragic destiny and limited agency. Gong Er is a skilled martial artist seeking revenge for the

death of her father. However, she is also burdened by her role as the guardian of her family's martial arts legacy. As she confronts her enemies and pursues justice, she must grapple with the sacrifices she must make, including the renunciation of personal relationships and her own happiness.

Gong Er's story highlights the sacrifices and suffering endured by female characters in Wuxia films. Despite her exceptional martial arts skills and determination, she is bound by her duty to preserve her family's legacy and cannot fully escape the tragic path set before her. Her agency is constrained by the weight of tradition and the limited choices available to her.

Both Jen Yu and Gong Er exemplify the recurring theme of tragic destinies and limited agency for female characters in Wuxia films. Their stories revolve around sacrifice, unfulfilled love, and the struggle to navigate societal expectations. These narratives reinforce the notion that women's stories are inherently tied to suffering and self-sacrifice, denying them the opportunity to shape their own destinies or achieve personal growth.

Cross-dressing in Wuxia Films

Female warriors in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Wuxia films share numerous commonalities in their portrayal, highlighting parallel themes and character traits. However, the Wuxia genre distinguishes itself by featuring a specific characteristic attributed to female warriors—cross-dressing. This narrative device empowers female characters, allowing them to challenge traditional gender roles, navigate societal expectations, and actively participate in martial arts and heroic endeavors. Cross-dressing serves as a means for these characters to subvert patriarchal structures and explore themes of identity, love, and societal norms within the genre.

The 2020 live-action adaptation of Disney's Mulan provides a notable example of cross-dressing among female warriors, illustrating the transformative journey of the titular character. Mulan defies societal expectations by disguising herself as a man to take her father's place in the Imperial Army. This act of cross-dressing allows Mulan to navigate the male-dominated military environment and challenge the limitations imposed upon women in her society, which "constitutes a sort of usurpation of the gender order in pre-modern China" (Dai, 2006, p. 64).

In her masquerade as a man, Mulan confronts the external challenges of warfare, showcasing remarkable bravery, skill, and determination. Her cross-dressing not only enables her to physically participate in combat but also empowers her to excel and make significant contributions to the war effort. By donning the male identity, Mulan gains access to opportunities and experiences traditionally reserved for men, proving her worth and defying the notion that women are inherently inferior warriors.

Furthermore, Mulan's cross-dressing journey extends beyond the external conflicts she faces. It becomes an internal struggle as she grapples with reconciling her true self with societal expectations. Through her disguise, Mulan must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining her façade and staying true to her identity. This internal conflict highlights the complexities and sacrifices Mulan endures in her quest to protect her family and uphold her sense of honor. Her journey becomes a symbol of female empowerment, inspiring audiences to question societal expectations and recognize the potential for greatness that lies within individuals, regardless of their gender.

The character of Jen Yu in the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" presents another depiction of a female engaging in cross-dressing, breaking away from the conventional portrayal of female warriors seen in Wuxia films. Jen "does not enact images of the canonical or stereotypical female warrior" (Szeto, 2011, p. 40) characterized by notions of honor and righteousness. Instead, she emerges as an independent individual who ventures into the realm of *Jianghu* (the fictional world of adventure), transcending her societal role as a mere object of desire and a commodity traded among men.

Jen's motive behind assuming a male persona is to challenge the prescribed gender roles that confine women to specific spheres. She seeks to access the public sphere, blurring the rigid boundaries between masculinity and femininity. Through her exceptional martial arts skills and formidable combat abilities, Jen gains entry into the traditionally male-dominated domain, symbolizing her pursuit of masculine power within the public sphere. The scene in which she dons men's clothing and defeats named male warriors showcases her competence in martial arts, effectively challenging the long-held notion in the Wuxia realm that women are inherently inferior in combat skills.

This portrayal also emphasizes the fluidity and complexity that undermine the dichotomy of gender roles, ultimately challenging the normative constructs of masculine superiority and feminine subservience. Jen's cross-dressing becomes a powerful manifestation of her rebellion against the established gender order, as she asserts her agency in a male-centric world.

However, the narrative also highlights the consequences of Jen's actions. Despite her aspirations for liberation, Jen finds herself isolated and becomes the catalyst for tragic events. This serves as a reminder of the perils and challenges faced by women who defy societal expectations and strive to assert their autonomy within a patriarchal framework.

The cross-dressing narratives of Mulan and Jen Yu in their respective films reveal the powerful and transformative potential of female warriors challenging societal expectations. These compelling portrayals of cross-dressing contribute to broader conversations about gender representation, empowerment, and the breaking of societal barriers within the Wuxia genre and beyond. They inspire audiences to question and challenge traditional notions of femininity, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation for the diverse and powerful roles that women can embody in narratives of strength, resilience, and self-discovery.

Conclusion

The comparative studies of female warriors in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Wuxia films shed light on the dual aspects of empowerment and containment. Both the MCU and Wuxia films present strong and empowered female characters who challenge societal expectations and embody resilience. These characters inspire audiences, breaking gender norms and promoting female empowerment. However, it is in the Wuxia films that the unique element of cross-dressing among female warriors emerges, providing a complex exploration of identity and societal constraints. The inclusion of cross-dressing allows these characters to navigate male-dominated spaces, challenge gender roles, and ultimately redefine traditional notions of heroism. By examining these two genres together, we gain a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which female warriors are depicted and the broader conversations surrounding gender representation and empowerment in popular culture.

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