

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

"Case Studies in Fairy Tales" requires students to undertake a sophisticated, multimodal writing and research project that draws on both creative and academic skill sets. Students choose a classic fairy tale and research its origins, history, transformations through retellings, and context in popular culture. Then, they must write their own creative version of the tale inspired and informed by their newly acquired background knowledge, carefully analyze the place of that new version within the wider perspective, and finally create a case study website that showcases everything they've created and learned about the tale.

Helen Luo did exceptional work on every facet of this demanding project. Arguably, the shining centerpiece of her case study is *The Fallen Sakura*, her retelling of *The Ballad of Fa Mulan*, a stylish, carefully constructed, emotionally moving piece which showcases Helen's talent as a creative writer. That said, the retelling might never have come to exist in its final form had it not been for the time and care that Helen put into the research she pursued in the early stages of the project. What's more, the essay in which she contextualizes and analyzes *The Fallen Sakura* reveals not only the complex layers of the creative work, but also Helen's own metacognitive perceptiveness. She quotes and close reads her own words unselfconsciously, reflecting not only on all the things her retelling does so successfully, but even on moments when her authorial intention doesn't match up with the result. That takes insight!

Helen's work beautifully demonstrates what I want all my students to learn from this project: to retell a fairy tale is to make a kind of argument about it—and at the same time, to write an analytical paper is to tell a kind of story.

Amy Bennett-Zendzian
WR 150: Case Studies in Fairy Tales

FROM THE WRITER

When presented with the assignment to research a fairy tale and write our own retelling, I knew that I wanted to do a tale that had both Asian and American influence. The *Ballad of Fa Mulan* seemed to be the perfect choice, as many people are familiar with the Disney version of Mulan, and the classic ballad is often committed into the memory of Chinese elementary students. While my research and reading of other renditions of the tale brought me diverse insights about the story's origins and meanings, I began to see certain patterns emerge. There isn't really a villain, like in other fairytales; instead the story follows Mulan overcoming both the limitations set by her gender and the challenges of hiding her identity amongst her fellow comrades, emphasizing the sacrifice she made for both family and country. While retellings differed in cultural values and plot details, their conclusions were mostly the same.

I began to wonder: What had happened to her father? Her mother? Her siblings? How did her decision impact their lives? Could the tale have an unhappy ending? Thus, my retelling focuses on the perspective of Mulan's younger sister, and the idea that perhaps Mulan leaving wasn't the best for everyone. We all have a tendency to think our actions are in the best interest of both others and ourselves, but our assumptions about what is right can often lead to unexpected and traumatic results. My retelling hopes to highlight the fact that we can't really save everyone—that our actions have repercussions and that there's always another side to the story. Furthermore, in order to maintain a close relationship with the classic ballad version, I adapted and altered the format of the original ballad into my tale.

HELEN LUO is a member of the College of Communication's class of 2019, intending to major in Journalism and minor in Advertising. Hailing from Virginia and Beijing, Helen has always loved reading and writing—from documenting her travels in a journal to writing creatively. She would like to partially dedicate the publication of this paper and thank her wonderful writing professor Amy Bennett-Zendzian, who's given helpful advice during both the writing and researching process. Furthermore she would like to thank her parents, high school English teachers, and friends for all of their support.

HELEN LUO

Prize Essay Award

THE FALLEN SAKURA: A RETELLING OF THE *BALLAD OF FA MULAN*

A year has passed, the Orchids¹ have bloomed—the smell of Mulan is in the air. Yet Mulan is still not home. Mulan is still at war. I tend to the gardens, to the pigs and hens and horses. I tend to my ill-stricken father, my heart-broken mother, and my toddling brother. I weave the silken prints and bring them to the markets before dawn. I sigh, as I think of Mulan.

“Tsiek Tsiek and again Tsiek Tsiek”²

Mother weaves, facing the window. I don’t hear the shuttle’s sound; I only hear mother’s sighs. I ask who is on mother’s mind? Who is in mother’s heart? Mother says: “Mulan is on mother’s mind. Mulan is in mother’s heart.”³ Mulan, my eldest daughter—so lovely, so dependable—I still remember her laugh. Her reassuring smile and the twinkle in her eyes that seemed to say ‘mother, everything will be ok.’ I still see the shadows of Mulan in the house, in the courtyard, in the village. Mulan, the perfect daughter, who wove the most delicate and beautiful silk patterns, took care of Little Lee and you, young Mu-Ying, who took the darkest worries off my mind. But Oh! Last night, I heard the hooves of the horses riding out again. I saw the shadow of Mulan disappearing past the furthest mountain, heard the battle cry of the Huns, and saw blood drip from Mulan’s sleeve—just like the red in the weave.”

Three years have passed, the Orchids have bloomed—the smell of Mulan is in the air. Yet Mulan is still not home. Mulan is still at war. I tend to the gardens, to the pigs and hens and horses. I brew the healthy concoctions of herbs for father; I cook a hearty dinner on behalf of mother; I teach calligraphy and characters to brother.

Ouch.

The knife slashes against my fingertips, blood dripping onto the cutting board.

I sigh as I quickly bandage the wound; I sigh, as I think of Mulan.

“Qing Clang and again Qing Clang”

Father fights—or attempts to—wielding his already rusted sword, only to hunch over in a fit of coughs. Father is unwell, but he continues on in a hypnotic trance, the familiar footwork of the fighting routine embedded in his blood. He fought in the last big war, he said. Father was a general—and then illness and time took his health as a toll. I hear father’s coughs, his haggard

¹ Orchids are in reference to one character, lan, in Mulan’s name, and its meaning. Lan hua = Orchids.

² Taken from the lines of the original ballad.

³ I render the format of the original lines in the poem: “Mulan weaves, facing the door. You don’t hear the shuttle’s sound, You only hear Daughter’s sighs. They ask Daughter who’s in her heart, They ask Daughter who’s on her mind. ‘No one is on Daughter’s heart, No one is on Daughter’s mind.’”

breathing. I hear father's sighs. I ask who is on father's mind? Who is in father's heart? Father says: "Mulan is on father's mind. Mulan is in father's heart. Mulan, my eldest, loveliest daughter, who risked her life for mine—Oh dear daughter are you well? Last night, I heard, ten thousand miles away, the businesses of war. Last night I heard Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu.⁴ Last night I saw Mulan, dressed in my own armor, fire in her eyes, only to watch her fall. I watched the fire disappear from her gaze as she fell limp, the screams of triumph and war mingling with the horrid smell of blood. I dreamt of Mulan, being hanged for treason. Last night I dreamt of Mulan in her red marriage gown, of her laughing in merriment as she held her child. Last night I dreamt of honor, dishonor, of life, and of death."

Five years have passed, the Orchids have bloomed—the smell of Mulan is in the air. Yet Mulan is still not home. Mulan is still at war. I tend to father, who is on the verge of death. I tend to mother, who can barely leave the bed. I tend to younger brother Lee, helping him with his studies, with his martial arts, and the struggles of life.

"Tsiek Tsiek and again Tsiek Tsiek"

I weave, facing the door. I don't hear the shuttle's sound. I hear my hefty sighs. I ask who is on my mind? Who is in my heart? I say: "Mulan is on my mind. Mulan is in Mu-Ying's heart. Mulan, the sister I barely knew. Mulan, the sister whose shadow I see. Mulan, the sister who left the family's burden on me. Father is sick. Mother is frail. Little brother Lee is still too small. Money has stopped a-flowing. No one wishes to buy our beautiful silk weaves in times of war—no one has enough money. The wealthy Wons are our only customers. And Oh. Their oldest son, Yuan, has taken a liking to me. Mulan, oh Mulan, when will you come back and save me?"

"Qing Clang and again Qing Clang"

Iron swords clash, as the Khan and the Huns meet in savage bloodshed. I hear the Yellow River's flowing water cry tsien tsien—I don't hear Father and Mother's cry. Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots, but not the whispers of my sister's calls. Chilly light shines on the blood-splattered iron armor. Generals die in a hundred battles, blood flooding the Yangtze's waters and making it a murky brown. Gently, the snow falls, blending with the blood-soaked ground as a single Sakura falls before my feet. It is not spring, Sakuras are not in bloom, and yet I sigh. My comrades ask who is on my mind? Who is in my heart? I say: "Mu-Ying is on Mulan's mind. Father, mother, and Lee are in my heart. Last night I dreamt of mother's famous chicken soup, of father teaching me martial arts. Last night I dreamt of Little Lee growing to be a man, of Mu-Ying's twinkling, cheerful eyes."⁵

Eight years have passed, the Orchids should have bloomed—the smell of Mulan is not in the air. Mulan is still not home. Mulan is still at war. I no longer tend to father. I no longer cook hearty dinners on behalf of mother. Brother Lee no longer attends school; instead he helps with the chores around the house of the Wons. He is in the stables—he is a servant boy.

"Tsiek Tsiek and again Tsiek Tsiek"

⁴ These two lines are copies of the following lines: "She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war" and "She only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu."

⁵ In this stanza, the perspective switches back to Mulan. Through her dialogue, Mulan reveals what is happening on the war-front, and also her homesickness. Furthermore I have rendered the following lines: "Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots, Chilly light shines on iron armor. Generals die in a hundred battles."

I weave, facing the door. I do not hear master's calls or the shuttle's sound. I only hear myself sigh. I ask who is in my heart? Who is on my mind? "Father, mother, and Little Lee are in my heart. Mulan is on my mind. My heart tears to see Little Lee, carrying the sacks of rice on his small back. My heart tears, cringes, each time I catch the Won's eldest son eyeing me fancifully, when he touches me in the dark of the night. My ears hesitate when I hear them call me Xiao-Yu, the name of a servant. Mulan, oh Mulan, when will you come back and save me?"

Ten years have passed. The stars are especially bright tonight. Father always said that when a person passes away, the stars glow brighter. Two stars glow bright. I wonder if, tonight, I'll see a third.

*"Crackle, snap, fizz and pop," the Firecrackers shout.
The war is over. The Khan has won. The Son of Heaven sits in the Splendid Hall. He gives out promotions in twelve ranks, and prizes of a hundred and more. He asks of Mulan what she so desires. "Mulan has no use for a minister's post. I wish to ride a swift mount to take me home."*

"Crackle, snap, fizz and pop," the Firecrackers shout.
I am marrying the eldest Won, Yuan—the rank of the third wife falling at my feet. But, at least now, Little Lee can attend school, can wed the woman of his dreams. I have married the eldest Won, and Mulan has returned home. She takes off her wartime gown, fixes her cloudlike hair, dabs on yellow flower powder and moves back into the empty house.⁶ Surprise is in her eyes, as she watches me don my own wartime gown. Though this one is less heavy, more red, donning a flair of fake merriness as it imprisons me for life.

Ten years have passed, the Orchids have bloomed—the smell of Mulan is in the air. Mulan is now home, Mulan is not at war.

I sigh.

I ask who is my heart, who is on my mind.

"Father, mother and Little Lee are on in my heart. Mulan is on my mind. Mulan, oh Mulan, you saved the country. But why, oh why, couldn't you save me?"

⁶ In this stanza, I use the following lines: "I take off my wartime gown/ And put on my old-time clothes/ Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair, Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder."

YOU MIGHT'VE SAVED THE WORLD, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU SAVED EVERYONE: ANALYSIS OF *THE FALLEN SAKURA*, A *BALLAD OF FA MULAN* RETELLING

Have you ever wondered what prompted Little Red Riding Hood's mother to send her out into the woods by her lonesome to visit her grandmother? Why the wolf chose to disguise himself as her grandmother before gobbling her up? Have you ever wondered about Maleficent's story in *Sleeping Beauty*? Fairy tales often omit the perspective, the voices, of minor characters because it could take away from the author's original intention of the tale. Yet, what's to say that Little Red Riding Hood didn't lie about her tale? Much as "History is written by the victors" (Winston Churchill), most classic fairytales are written by the hero or heroine. The emphasis is placed on the hero or heroine as they accomplish impossible tasks, come to transformational realizations, or defeat evil villains. Similarly, while the author introduces minor characters in *The Ballad of Fa Mulan* such as Mulan's family members, the poem mainly centers on the main character, Mulan, and her struggles. In most retellings, plays, and motion pictures based on Mulan, the story portrays plot lines similar to the original. The elements always present are Mulan taking her father's place in the army enlistment, her struggles during her time in the army, and her warm welcome home. After reading many different retellings of other fairy tales in class, such as "The Wolf's Postscript to Little Red Riding Hood," I began to wonder why there wasn't a version of this story told from the perspective of one of Mulan's family members. What happened to them? How did Mulan's choices affect them? Did the story really have a happy ending? *The Fallen Sakura* attempts to answer these questions by using the perspective of Mulan's younger sister, Mu-Ying, to tell her side of the story—of what happened on the home front while Mulan fought on the warfront. Mulan left because she believed it was the right thing to do, because she believed it could save her family. *The Fallen Sakura*, however, presents a counterargument that all choices have both consequences, and that one person cannot save *everyone*.

The Ballad of Mulan (sometimes also known as *The Ballad of Fa Mulan* or *The Ballad of Hua Mulan*) is a Chinese poem of anonymous origin. The poem is believed to have originated as a folk song in the fifth or sixth century CE during a period of foreign domination when China was divided between the north and south ("Ode"). The Xianbei, a non-Han ethnic group, were the rulers of the northern dynasties whilst the Southern Dynasties had stronger, more cultural ties, to the Han Dynasty (Kwa xiii). In summary, the legend of Mulan is of a maiden who performs heroic deeds in battle while dressed as a male soldier. According to Lan Dong, "Certain elements of the story are consistent in its many retellings: a young woman takes the place of her elderly father in war, serves her country valiantly in disguise as a man, and returns home with triumph and honor to resume her womanly life" (1). Most of these elements can be seen in *The Fallen Sakura*. Only, even though Mulan returns home, triumphant and ready to resume her "womanly life" (Dong 1), her life has already changed so much so that her role as a woman before she left has changed dramatically. She can no longer easily slip back into her old roles as a daughter and an older sister—in fact, *The Fallen Sakura* reveals that even though she sacrificed herself for her family to fight in the war, Mulan also gave up her responsibilities as a woman and a daughter: she was not there upon her father's passing. She did not care for her heart-broken mother or her ill-stricken father. She could not protect her younger sister or brother as they were bought as servants. By leaving and taking on the responsibilities of a man, Mulan neglected her responsibilities as a woman.

While plot elements of my retelling are consistent with most versions of the tale, I had to make a choice about what set of cultural values to emphasize. Dong points out that depending on

the “historical and cultural context in which it is retold... its plot and moral import are reshaped” (1). Regardless, each rendition of the tale “evolve[s] [Mulan] into an ideal heroine during a lengthy process of storytelling and retelling” (Dong 2). For example, in Disney’s adaptation, Mulan leaves in order to be true to herself “even in the face of persecution” (Hale), discovering herself and finding independence while at the same time saving her father. Disney’s values differ from those in the ballad and many historical retellings, where what prompts Mulan to leave is filial piety. It is a story about a daughter sacrificing and risking death in order to save her father—her family. Thus upon winning the war, she chooses to take as her reward a “swift mount/To take [her] back to [her] home” (Frankle), whereupon she settles back into her role as being a woman. Similarly, in a 2009 movie adaptation of the tale, the director adds a romantic subplot as Mulan falls in love with Sub-Commander Wentai; however, Mulan essentially gives up her pursuit of her love for her country. She returns home to take care of her ill father, while her lover Wentai will wed the Rouran Princess by command of the emperor in order to bring peace at last (Ma). Disney’s adaptation focuses on the moral of staying true to oneself because that is a value American culture holds dear. Both the original ballad and the Chinese film adaptation, however, emphasize the values of filial piety and loyalty to the country, because those are values Chinese culture holds dear. Thus, in *The Fallen Sakura*, I chose to stick with those values as a reason for Mulan’s departure.

Yet, while the values and certain details surrounding the plot were often changed in retellings, the conclusion was almost always the same—it ended happily. This made me wonder, what if the story didn’t have a happy ending? What if Mulan didn’t come back home to a celebration and warm-hearted welcome by both her family members and villagers? What if, after leaving, the repercussions actually caused her family to fall apart? Even though Mulan sacrifices herself by leaving for war and disguising herself as a man, the repercussions of her actions if caught prior to winning the war could still be great—it could lead to an execution and bring dishonor to her family name. Historically, Mulan’s actions can still be seen as treason, even if her motives are far from it. By choosing to leave, she saves her father from possibly dying were he to serve in the war; however, she also left the burden of being the oldest onto her younger sister. Leaving the household also meant one less pair of hands to help around the house to earn income. It meant the responsibilities of being the oldest would fall upon someone else – in this case, Mu-Ying, Mulan’s younger sister. Furthermore, Mulan leaving for war in place of her father only solved one problem—but during the time of her absence, no doubt other problems would arise that she wouldn’t be able to solve. Thus, in *The Fallen Sakura*, I explore these problems and repercussions: after Mulan leaves, her parents fall ill and die. The family becomes bankrupt, and both Mu-Ying and Little Lee are taken in as servants by the wealthy Wons. In hopes of giving Little Lee a better future, Mu-Ying reluctantly agrees to Yuan, the eldest Won’s, proposal—even though it places her in the position of being the lowly third wife and unable to ever find true love. *The Fallen Sakura* emphasizes the idea that the decision one might think is the best also has negative repercussions.

In order to highlight the toll Mulan’s absence took on the family, *The Fallen Sakura* mimics the original ballad by asking a question that is then answered by a character via dialogue. Inspired by retellings such as Agha Shahid Ali’s “The Wolf’s Postscript to ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’” I used a minor character as the main character and narrator in *The Fallen Sakura*. Thus, the retelling is told from Mulan’s younger sister Mu-Ying’s eyes. In order to keep the story closely tied to the ballad, I kept most of the main elements. Mulan still leaves for war—but the focus of the tale centers on the obstacles faced by Mu-Ying and her family rather than Mulan’s struggles in war. Understanding the structure of the tale is essential to understanding the retelling. Essentially, *The Fallen Sakura* reveals the thoughts of the mother, father, Mu-Ying, and Mulan, in different sections. Separated by the phrases “[blank] years have passed,” the tale foreshadows the changes surrounding the family throughout time via the eyes of the individual family members themselves (Luo).

Furthermore, in order to keep the poetic aspect of the ballad, I mimicked the sentence structure from *The Ballad of Fa Mulan* and kept select phrases from the poem, such as “*Tsiek Tsiek and again Tsiek Tsiek*,” in order to create a correlation (Luo). The structures set off by these onomatopoeic sounds symbolize the different roles of man and woman. “*Tsiek Tsiek and again Tsiek Tsiek*,” the sound made when weaving, is a representation of the domestic aspect of life and the role of a woman. “*Qing Clang and again Qing Clang*” is a representation of war and the role of a man. Each of these lines separate a stanza and a different perspective, revealing how Mulan’s absence has affected the lives of each individual family member. Moreover, *The Fallen Sakura* uses carefully chosen imagery, symbols, and figurative language in place of exposition, a stylistic choice that admittedly can obscure details and potentially make the story confusing for the reader. For one, readers might not understand that during Mulan’s absence, her parents both passed away: her father from illness, and her mother from depression and grief. Since their parents died with a large debt, leaving the family bankrupt, Mu-Ying and her younger brother became servants to the rich Wons. There, Mu-Ying catches the eye of the Eldest Son Yuan, and is pursued romantically against her will—eventually, she marries him in hopes of giving her younger brother a brighter future. In both cases, the heroines sacrifice themselves on behalf of the family: Mulan on behalf of her father, Mu-Ying on behalf of her younger brother. But the difference is, Mu-Ying’s wartime gown, her marriage gown, traps her for life, which is why she describes it as “less heavy, more red, donning a flair of fake merriness as it imprisons me for life”—while Mulan has returned home, free to an extent (Luo).

The twist at the end, with Mu-Ying remarking “Mulan, oh Mulan, you saved the country. But why, oh why, couldn’t you save me?” emphasizes the fact that one person cannot save *everyone*. Even the most valiant heroes or heroines have a story of having failed someone, having not been able to save a person dear to them—because when you try to save the world, when you sacrifice yourself, you’re also giving up something else too. Everything has an opportunity cost; life is a constant battle of weighing those costs and making a decision. In *The Fallen Sakura*, I wanted to make readers think, what if the heroine, in her haste to fulfill one obligation, left another role unfilled? What if Mulan couldn’t save *everyone*?

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