

Cultural Difference: Ancient China in Western Film Mulan(1998)

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ABSTRACT

Mulan's story is originally a Chinese ancient poetry *The Ballad of Mulan*. From ancient times to the present, this poetry has been adapted into countless traditional opera, television series, plays and films in China. The showing of Disney cartoon film *Mulan* in 1998 brought this Chinese old story to countless audiences all around the world and it also meant that Mulan became one of Disney princesses. Although the whole film told a Chinese story, it actually still showed huge differences between the film and genuine Chinese ancient culture. First, in the film, there are several Chinese elements misunderstood. Different traditions in western countries and China can also make the film do not look like a real Chinese film. Moreover, it is also a Disney film, which is a little special among films. Actually, the film does not aim at telling a genuine Chinese story, but it is a western Disney princess film with a Chinese heroine.

Keywords: *Film, Mulan, Chinese ancient culture, Western Culture, Disney princess*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mulan's story is originally a Chinese ancient poetry *The Ballad of Mulan*, which has been adapted into traditional opera, plays, television series and films in China and other countries. The showing of *Mulan(2020)* draws Chinese audience's attention to Chinese ancient culture in the film. Most of Chinese audience think this film does not tell a genuine Chinese story. On the contrary, *Mulan(1998)* is always highly praised. However, those Chinese cultural elements in *Mulan(1998)* actually are also different from genuine ones, but since it is a cartoon film, the audience maybe not so strict about the details in the film.

In fact, there are numbers of reasons why it can show a totally different ancient China worth being researched, which include the difference between poetry and film, cultural variation in two countries, the characteristic of Disney films and so on.

As the first Disney Mulan film, *Mulan(1998)* is more than a normal cartoon film. It is also a symbol of Mulan's internationalization and a part of the variety of Mulan's meaning. Analyzing these reasons can also make the image of Mulan more complete.

2. CHINESE ELEMENTS IN THE FILM

First of all, the film uses various of Chinese

elements from different eras. Mulan's story is set in the Northern and Southern Dynasties(420-589AD) in the original Chinese poetry. But the film actually does not show the audience a specific era, it breaks the limitation of time and designs the Disney Mulan to live in a nebulous ancient China, so that Chinese elements can be used freely. So there are modern Chinese glasses, newspapers and the Great Wall from Ming Dynasty(1368-1644AD) in the film.

In addition, it is reasonable that there is a misunderstanding of Chinese culture in western films. Dressing up Mulan and visiting matchmakers is a classic plot in the film. In order to show Mulan's femininity, Mrs Fa and other ladies use unnatural make-up and plenty of bright colours, such as red, bright pink and purple to dress up Mulan. However, in ancient China, women were not allowed to wear bright colour, or they could be seen as frivolous. In addition, in ancient China, red and purple were considered as holy and noble, civilians like Mulan were forbidden wearing these kinds of colour[1][2]. But in cartoon films, colour is a quite important tool of influencing audience's feel, so exaggerated colours are essential in showing the cheerful and funny plot[3]. However, when the same plot appeared in live action *Mulan(2020)*, it was seemed more unnatural and even awkward. Besides, in ancient China, girls also do not visit matchmakers on their own. Most of the time, girl's parents visit matchmakers

individually. Because of these, when the audience watches this plot, they may think this kind of action cannot happen in ancient China.

Moreover, because of the different understanding of Chinese culture, the tiny cute Mushu, who is different from the traditional huge and ferocious dragon, could be created. In western countries, dragon is seen as an evil and ferocious creature, but it is a holy creature in China. Designing this funny and cute family guardian Mushu is a really clever choice, it can not only make western audience change their mind of dragon and accept him, but also keep Chinese dragon's holy status.

3. DIFFERENT EXPRESSION CAUSED BY DIFFERENT CULTURE

Mulan(1998) actually is still a western film in most Chinese audience's eyes. The problem comes down to different thoughts, practice and others between western countries and China.

3.1. Making a Chinese Poetry to a Western Film

Adapting literary works is one of the most important ways of screenwriting. However, since these two things have different media: literary works are always in forms of written words and films are dynamic images. Literary works can break the limitation of space-time and leave readers more imagination. Especially for poetry, the Chinese one is famous for using less words to express more. While in a film, the story must be told in the limited time, and more details must be added. So it is reasonable that there are differences between literary works and films[4].

Most of Chinese people first learn *Mulan* from *The Ballad of Mulan*. In the poetry, *Mulan* joined the army for her father, fought for her country with her companions, finally went back home and turned to be a girl[5]. But when it is adapted into a film, the whole story has to be more intricate. *Mulan(1998)* is a typical film which employs the three act structure. In the film, there must be obstacles to *Mulan* achieving the goal and conflicts to develop the story[6]. To complete the film, something have to be different from the original story. For example, in *The Ballad of Mulan*, life in the barracks is arduous, but in the film, the plot of barracks is designed for game section. In this case, soldiers can live a more cheerful life in the traditional barracks. This kind of differences breaks stereotypes of the Chinese poetry, and even Chinese culture.

3.2. Different Views Between Western Countries and China

It is sure that when a poetry is adapted into a film, but the different thoughts is a more important reason.

In ancient China, when praise a girl or woman, people prefer to emphasize how beautiful and gentle she is because of the traditional cognition to women, such as the elements in *The Ballad of Mulan*. Although there are no words directly describe *Mulan's* appearance, people still can imagine a charming girl from words about *Mulan's* making up herself. While in the film, *Mulan* is not a perfect girl in most people's eyes — she is not a good bride and even cannot recite the final admonition. She is not a good man either — she is weak and always make mistakes. But she finds the balance between total femininity and total masculinity, finally wins everybody's respect in her own way. *Mulan* makes herself an example to tell the audience that everyone is special. That is one of the most important reasons why *Mulan(1998)* can gain appreciation. However, *Mulan(2020)* is not as clever as the last one. In that film, *Mulan* can succeed because she has "Chi", which makes her special. And she does not find a balanced way to show femininity, because her way of proving herself is only acting as strong as a man. In addition, when she comes back home, her little sister still gets married. So it may give audience a message that if a woman is not naturally gifted or strong, she cannot be as great as a man, and the only way of her to survive is getting married to "bring her family honor".

Confucianism is popular in ancient China. It emphasizes that people can always show filial piety toward parents and be loyal to country, and *The Ballad of Mulan* also tells these principles. However, the main idea of *Mulan(1998)* does not contain being loyal for country, and showing filial piety is also the most important part. In order to promote the development of the plot, *Mulan* in the film reveals herself and is abandoned in the snow, then she dare face her real identity and gender, finally she can show her special femininity. So obviously, American *Mulan* is aimed to show girls' power and support woman's rights — she joins the army not only for her father but also for herself.

Besides, since *The Ballad of Mulan* aims at teaching people to be royal to country, every soldier have to fight for their country fearlessly. But in the film, *Mulan* defeats the enemy on her own at the foot of the snow mountain. That is not only because she is the heroine but because of the difference between collectivism and individualism. In Chinese *Mulan* films, although *Mulan* is the main character, she still fights side by side with her companions. American individualism originates from the Renaissance. At that time, Europeans started to care about humanism and rights for human. And then, Europeans brought them to America. Because of American Revolutionary War, individualism is put into a more important place[7]. However, Chinese traditional Confucianism emphasizes that people are a whole — family is a whole, army is a whole and country is also a whole. So collectivism is more important than

individualism in China. In this case, it is impossible for Chinese Mulan to fight with the enemy by herself, and other soldiers also cannot be too scared to battle.

3.3. A Disney Princess Film

Excepted an American film, *Mulan(1998)* is also a Disney princess film. Like other princess, Mulan has animals accompany with her and finally finds her prince. In addition, like other Disney cartoon film, music is one of an essential part of the film. So when Mulan and other roles are singing, audience can easily call to mind Disney cartoon films.

The Walt Disney Company is one of the most famous film company. As a famous film company, and the primary objective of it is more than telling stories. Chinese *The Ballad of Mulan* is written for education, while *Mulan(1998)* is directed for the market. Young girls are the main target consumers for Disney Princess multimedia, not only for films but also for related licensed toys, collectibles, apparel, and household goods featuring the film characters[8]. In 1990s, four princesses were born in Disney: Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan. These four princesses are different from other previous princesses like Snow White and Cinderella who only wait for her prince without doing anything. On the contrary, they can think independently and prefer to gain happiness on their own. For example, Pocahontas finally chooses to get separated with John for her village. So princesses in this period tend to “deviate from the gender stereotypes of previous fairy-tale films”[9]. Obviously, Mulan is not only a heroine in a cartoon film, but a member of Disney princesses who have to set a good example and attract young girls. However, in Chinese audience’s stereotypes, Mulan is only a normal girl who does what other girls do and live other girls’ life, the only difference is that she joins the army for her father. But when she is in the barracks, she is still the same as other soldiers, even the contributions she makes are still not as special as what she does in the film.

Moreover, animal is also an important element in Disney princess films, for example Abu in *Aladdin* and Meeko in *Pocahontas*. Similarly, there are also animals around Mulan—the cricket and Mushu. Mushu plays an essential part in *Mulan(1998)*, and because of him, the film is liked by more people. Unlike traditional Chinese serious dragon, in the film, Mushu plays the role of clown, who appears in almost all Disney princess film, such as Genie in *Aladdin*, Cogsworth and Lumiere in *Beauty and the Beast*. Because of his funny actions and personality charm, Mushu is popular among audience all over the world. Mushu makes the whole story more interesting and dramatic—the story is more than showing the awaken of Mulan, it also tells the growth of Mushu. At first, he always gets into trouble and succeed in nothing just like Mulan, but he is eager

for proving that he can be a qualified family guardian. Finally, he succeeds with Mulan and also gain respect and achieve his dream. While in *Mulan(2020)*, there is no Mushu. Instead, there is a phoenix coming along with Mulan. Actually in ancient China, people were used to using phoenix to represent women. So honestly, the serious phoenix is more like a genuine Chinese creature than funny Mushu, but since Mushu has struck the root in the audience’s mind, using phoenix to replace Mushu is obviously not a clever choice.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, the reason why *Mulan(1998)* is not like a Chinese film is cultural difference. First, when a Chinese poetry is adapted into an American film, and Chinese elements which are showed by western people are definitely different from the ones showed by Chinese people. What’s more, the problem comes down to the fact that, the film is produced by Americans, and the main idea of the film and characters’ thoughts are totally in an “American style”. And since Mulan is a Disney princess and is expected to set a model, she also has to cater for the market.

So Mulan(1998) is more a western film than a Chinese film—it tells a western style story, and Mulan also has western thoughts. If use a western girl to replace Mulan, it still can be a completed film. However, Chinese elements can bring feelings of freshness to the audience. Mulan is the first and the only Chinese princess, though she is a member of Disney princesses, her experience and personality make her specialty. At the same time, her shining point attracts more audience for the film.

The past is always explained by the view which is limited by people’s present cognition[10]. The Mulan we see now is created by present society. No matter what she is like now, she is a symbol of the development of culture. *The Ballad of Mulan* is a story about an ancient Chinese girl who is brave, loyal to her country and kind to parents, while the film *Mulan(1998)* contains elements and views about woman’s right. However, without *The Ballad of Mulan*, there will not be *Mulan(1998)*, and *Mulan(1998)* also makes *The Ballad of Mulan* more complete and vivid.

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