

# The Study of the Cross-Cultural Communication of Mulan based on 5W Communication Model

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## ABSTRACT

The live-action film *Mulan*, which was released in 2020, did not receive ideal reviews in China. In order to explore the failure of adaptation and integration of Chinese culture and Chinese spirit in *Mulan*, this paper analyzes Chinese culture and expression symbols in the content of the film based on Lathwell's 5W model theory and cross-cultural communication theory. At the same time, according to the criticism and reflection of *Mulan*, the author puts forward some opinions on the Chinese culture going abroad and the cross-cultural communication between China and the West.

**Keywords:** *Mulan, 5W Model Theory, Cross-Cultural Communication, Walt Disney Company.*

## 1. BACKGROUND

With the development of globalization and the deepening of China's Economic Reform and opening up, China's economy is growing prosperity. China's attitude towards the world is more inclusive, and more and more multinational companies and industries are entering the Chinese market. At the same time, this country with huge population, its consumption capacity and consumption potential is extremely huge. As a result, the Walt Disney Company announced plans for Hong Kong Disneyland in 1999, tilting the entire Asia-Pacific strategy toward Hong Kong. On January 1, 2005, Disney headquarters appointed Zhang Zhizhong as the director of China region which marks the full launch of Disney's related business in mainland China.

China is already the world's second largest film market, and Chinese audiences alone can contribute millions of dollars to a Hollywood film. Based on this, Disney pays more attention to the needs of Chinese audiences and the exploration of Chinese culture. On June 19, 1998, the animated film *Mulan*, based on the Chinese folk poem *Mulan*, was released in the United States. From 2008 to 2016, the *Kung Fu Panda* series was released, and Po, the fun-loving panda, quickly gained a large number of fans in China. On Sept 11, 2020, the live-action movie *Mulan* was released on the Chinese mainland. These series of Disney animations and movies adapted from Chinese stories reflect Disney's determination to actively explore the Chinese market and make efforts to realize cross-cultural communication.

This article will focus on the story of a legendary Chinese warrior presented in the Disney film *Mulan*. At the heart of the story is that *Mulan* has an unknown power, "Chi" or "Qi". In order to resist the invasion of the Rouran Khaganate tribe from the south, the emperor ordered each family to send a male soldier to join the army. *Mulan* stood out as a substitute for the disabled father enlisted in the army so she disguised as a man named *Huajun*. In the resistance to the invasion of Rouran Khaganate, she went through hardships. Along the way, she realized the importance of accepting herself, and she begun to face the power of "Chi" that she had had. In the end, she succeeded in saving the country and became loyal, brave and true. She not only got the recognition of the country, but also brought supreme honor to the family.

However, the film which invested the \$200 million or 1.4 billion yuan [1] has failed to achieve the desired box office, word of mouth and communication effect on the Chinese mainland. Its rating on Douban, which is an influential film review platform in China, is only 5.0 points, better than 19 percent of costume films and 9 percent of action films. [2] From its debut on the Chinese mainland on Sept 11 to Nov 16, it has grossed 278 million yuan. [3] Comments from Chinese netizens have also been mostly critical. For example, some critics of audience, Movie lovers and Disney movie fans on Douban criticize from the aspects of scenes, music and color: "*Mulan's* film has a variety of colors, but the difference between real scenes and special effects is too great. Music forcibly sensational. Sound and painting are

separated. The plot lacks preparation. Everything that should be done is superficial." [4] "Mulan is strong, but oddly, she doesn't have the infectious energy to be able to empathize with." [5] One reviewer pointed out in terms of the protagonist's mental strength. From the perspective of the collision and blending of Eastern and Western cultures, some critics pointed out that "the whole film is full of the conjecture of Eastern culture and the accumulation of symbols... There are no adapted characters and images to bring new feelings to the audience, only the grafted Western cultural values and reasoning without content." [6]

Thus it can be seen that Mulan was not recognized in the origin of its story, and Disney's adaptation and integration of Chinese culture and spirit was not very successful this time. As a work of cross-cultural communication, it can be said that there are many loopholes.

Based on the perspective of communication, this paper applies Lasswell's 5W theory and cross-cultural communication theory to analyze the deviation of the understanding of Chinese culture in the film communication content and symbol application of Mulan, so as to analyze the communication effect of the film Mulan.

## **2.THE ONENESS OF CHINESE CULTURE IN MULAN**

At the beginning of the film, it pointed out that Mulan was a girl with "Chi", but this kind of power could not be possessed by all people, and those who had "Chi" would become the object of discussion and ostracism. Coincidentally, the other female character in the film is also a witch fairy with strong "Chi", and she helped Rouran attack the Central Plains because of the discussion and ostracism. "Chi" in this film is a specific performance of strong attack which lets the fairy into an animal and control the power of nature. However, after a series of hardships, Hua Mulan began to accept her true self and rationally use "Chi". Finally, with the help of "Chi", she saved the country. This is not the first time Disney has used the word "Chi". In Kung Fu Panda 3, Po struggles to discover the true meaning of chi. Also, there is a villain named Fake.

However, this paper argues that Disney's animations and movies do not really understand the meaning of "Chi" in traditional Chinese culture. As for the concept of "Chi" in Chinese traditional culture, and different schools of theories have different interpretations. A definition is given in the Pre-Qin Dynasty ancient book *Wenzi*, which puts forward the proposition that "Tao is one" and holds that "Tao" and "Chi" are interlinked, "Tao" is "Chi", and "Chi" is "Tao". [7] In combination with Lao Tzu's statement in *Tao Te Ching*, "All things are born from something, and something is born from

nothing. Tao gives birth to one, one gives life to two, two gives birth to three, three gives birth to all things, all things restore Yin and hold Yang, "Chi" is for harmony." [8] Therefore, "Chi" here is interpreted as the beginning of everything, similar to the origin in the Big Bang. In Confucianism, "Chi" is more directed to the spiritual field. For example, Mencius once said, "nourishing the noble Chi", "Chi is also the most powerful thing. It is directly nourished but harmless and blocks between heaven and earth." [9] This "Chi" is grand and strong and can be nourished with justice to fill the space between heaven and earth. In TCM which is short for Traditional Chinese Medicine theory, there is also a unique cognition of "Chi". Wang Chong's book *On Heng* points out that, "The earth is in harmony with each other, and everything is born from themselves." ZhangZai in *Zhengmeng · Taihe* considers that: "Too empty can not be without Chi, Chi must gathers together and then born all things, and all things separate to form the empty." Chi divides Yin and Yang, suggests the unity of quality and energy, and provides the principle that all things are transformed from Chi. For human beings, the maintenance of life depends entirely on Chi, which is the nutrition of all organizational activities and the functional vitality of all organs and tissues.[10]

The various definitions and interpretations above all represent that "Chi" occupies an important position in traditional Chinese culture and is a noun with multiple meanings. It is an abstract being, and there are many figurative representatives in the world. In philosophy, "Chi" is usually classified as objective idealism. People put things they want to place in this term. With the development of China's five thousand years of history, "Chi" is gradually enriched and diversified.

In daily life, Chinese people also often use the word "Chi" or "Qi". For example, if a person does not bow to the power and insists on his bottom line, people will call him a person with "Qi Jie" which means "moral integrity". Therefore, "Chi" is a kind of good moral character. Another example is that some people are annoyed and sad because of negative experience. They are usually considered to be "Sheng Qi(angry)". At this time, "Chi" is more like a generalization of emotion. Sometimes the tongue will be yellow and rough, and we will warn him if there is "Shi Qi(moisture)" in his body. Therefore, even if ordinary people cannot tell exactly what "Chi" is, they can distinguish the meanings of different "Chi" in the right occasions, which is the common sense, theory and national tacit understanding formed in the long-term life of the Chinese nation. However, the relevant staff of Disney Company are not native Chinese, and they do not fully understand the various connotations and meanings of "Chi", nor do they have common sense and national tacit understanding. As a result, Disney is producing content that they have never touched before. All they can get is words and

explanations. But they cannot get that kind of atmosphere created by the full, three-dimensional influence of Chinese culture.

From this perspective, it can be seen that the expression of "Chi" in the film *Mulan* is not accepted by Chinese audiences. It's like a mask, covering something with a seemingly advanced Eastern vocabulary that Westerners don't understand. If Hua Mulan feels depressed because she is not recognized by others, after a variety of things, she has proved her ability and passed on the idea that "I am this way, then I will be the most authentic myself". This is exactly in line with the classic American movie routines and typical values of individual heroism, and the original story of the feelings of family and loyalty and filial piety did not highlight. "Chi" is more like a tool to convey western values in *Mulan*, and its deep cultural core of eastern values and cultural essence not reflected in the film.

### **3. CHINESE SYMBOLS ARE NOT USED PROPERLY IN MULAN**

Since *Mulan* is adapted from the Chinese folk song *Mulan Poem* from the Northern Dynasty, the film uses a lot of Chinese symbols. In the clothing, architecture, writing and so on have a strong Chinese flavor so that the film studied the characteristics of cultures in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, however, there are many obvious improper use.

First of all, in terms of clothing, the period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties in China was a great split period in history. The northern Hu (the Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China) people moved south, and the Northern Dynasty inherited the sixteen states of the Five Hu, so the characteristics of the integration of Hu and Han were very obvious. At this time, most of the costumes in the Southern and Northern Dynasties followed the old system of the Qin and Han dynasties. However, the frequent change of regime and the integration of ethnic groups made the costume system tend to change. The senior class of the society will still be the standard jacket under the dress as the formal occasion of choice; Shen-yi which was a Han Chinese formal dress with the top and bottom clothes connected together, and different colors of fabric are used as the edges was often worn by officials on a daily basis; The lower class wore a "short brown" jacket length above and below the hips or knees, with trousers. In the film *Mulan*, the costumes of people of all grades generally conform to the characteristics of that era, which reflects that Disney has studied the expression of Chinese culture. Through the analysis of color extraction and literature review, we can summarize the characteristics of clothing color in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties: color is rich, but not full and distinguished by class. Through the investigation of the rules of the court dress system in the north and south of Wei and Jin Dynasties, it was found

that the empress and official women wore blue, blue and black clothes in many cases, except for the emperor and officials who would use the red color to show their power and attract attention. Therefore, it can be inferred that at that time, the three colors were more popular, and the Northern Wei Dynasty advocated water morality, which can also confirm this statement. Later in the Northern Zhou Dynasty, green appeared in the clothing. No matter it is dark, cyan, green, or the purple stipulated in the sun, all belong to the color of calm. [11] In the film, the emperor dressed in bright yellow when he went to court, but in fact, the Chinese emperor only wore bright yellow in the Qing Dynasty. Moreover, in the film *Mulan*, the overall clothing tone is high saturation tone, with obvious color conflicts. Red, yellow and green are full of eyes, giving people a kind of no beauty and not completely in line with the era of vulgarity, overall application distortion.

Secondly, in terms of architecture, the characteristic structure of the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties were Herringbone arch and one bucket three litre combination. The shape of the structure was similar to triangulation, and it was a wooden structure, like a child's Lego toys. In addition, pavilions were common, and the plane was mainly square. In popular terms, it is angular, with elongated upturned eaves, like the wings of swallows flying, revealing aura in the overall solemnities. However, in the film, Hua Mulan's family lives in a round earth building. The buildings in this shape were first built in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, later than the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, and were mainly distributed in Fujian Province, which is an obvious period loophole in the film.

Finally, in terms of Chinese characters. During the period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, there was political turmoil, and the country was divided. Thus, the culture was integrated and the society was open, and there were great innovations in calligraphy style. Regular script is the most popular calligraphy style in China's feudal society from Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to Sui and Tang Dynasties. It has a square structure and starts from the top right. There are changes in writing, starting and closing the pen. The running script also witnessed considerable development. The *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, known as "the first line of writing in the world", appeared during this period. The writing flow is brisk, the words are linked together, and the whole is very smooth and artistic. Cursive script was also in progress at this time. In the movie *Mulan*, the characters of loyalty, courage and true carved on the sword are mainly official script, but official script is mainly characterized by silkworm head and swallowtail, while those on the sword are of the same thickness and lack of variation. The word "filial piety" on the jade pendants is a regular character. The single character appears on the jade pendants, and the carving is somewhat clumsy. In general, the use of Chinese

characters in *Mulan* is a little rough and lacks aesthetic feeling.

#### **4. CRITICISM AND REFLECTION ON THE FILM MULAN**

Lasswell's 5W theory consists of five parts, that is, Who, Says what, In which channel, To whom, and With what effect. [12] This paper would make conclusions based on 5W model theory and the communication process of five parts.

In the process of spreading the film *Mulan*, the communicator was Disney Company. As a large multinational corporation, Walt Disney Company is committed to creating the wonderful points in the traditional Chinese stories. As an American company, Disney has its own position of American values, and inevitably integrates the choices and opinions of American people in the creation process. In terms of movie content, the plot of *Mulan* presents a typical American hero story, such as the hero has the ability that ordinary people do not have, so she is ostracized by the crowd. *Mulan* went through a series of hardships, during which she was enlightened by the noble people who knew her, so that she realized that her differences were her own advantages, and finally put her talents to good use to relieve her predicament. The whole story of the film reflects the strong values of individualism, feminism and heroism. Of course, such stories and values could fit into most American blockbusters but not suitable for the Chinese audience. However, *Mulan* is a film based on a Chinese story. Naturally, there are many Chinese elements in *Mulan*, and the story itself has a strong color of collectivist values. In the film presentation, we can see Disney's exploration and study of Chinese culture, which is undoubtedly the embodiment of respect for Chinese culture. However, in many places the use of Chinese symbols is inappropriate, the use of concepts is too shallow and clearly anachronistic. Many symbols are used to create a China in the eyes of Americans, rather than the real China in history, which will reinforce the stereotype of China for viewers. From the feelings of the receivers, Chinese people, the origin of the story, will have a confused feeling when watching this film, because this is not the *Mulan* they imagined when they were educated in Chinese culture since childhood. Moreover, the obvious non-traditional expressions in this film will also make Chinese audiences feel uncomfortable that they have not been taken seriously. In addition, there is also a contradiction between American values of individualism, feminism and heroism and traditional Chinese values of collectivism, which confuses the audience. Based on the above aspects, the communication effect of the film *Mulan* has not reached the ideal expectation. The network rating and post-viewing evaluation are also mainly negative evaluation.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

From a practical point of view, it is inevitable to carry out cross-cultural communication with the shadow of one's own nation or country. However, we should try our best to appreciate the core of each other's culture and understand its multi-level and deep connotation. Instead, after watching the works of cross-cultural communication, we only feel that this is a film with the same name. The obvious sense of discomfort and disconnection among the people of the original nationality represents that the cross-cultural communication is actually unsuccessful.

Nowadays, Chinese films are also faced with various opportunities and challenges on how to "go to sea". In today's global cultural exchange, cross-cultural communication can be seen everywhere. Chinese films should take full advantage of the opportunity and actively spread Chinese culture by referring to international standards. It is necessary to draw lessons from other countries' successful cases of intercultural communication, analyse and explore, and strive to gather the strengths of hundreds of schools to form China's own intercultural communication program. At the same time, we should have cultural confidence, deeply explore the national culture, so that the excellent culture of our nation in the contemporary revitalization. Moreover, foreign cultural communication is not to directly broadcast domestic films in their original form abroad, but to carry out selective and modified communication according to the customs and cultural traditions of different countries, so as to respect the feelings of people in other countries and realize the real sense of cultural sea and cross-cultural communication.

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