

# New Trends of Culture Response in Contemporary China: A Case Study of Cultural Localization

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## ABSTRACT

With the development of modern China, some great changes happened locally. There are different trends of responses to Disney culture in China. This paper finds that nowadays Chinese people's response to western culture has changed from full acceptance of the past news to positive response in contemporary times, including a reinterpretation of Disney's classic images and critical responses. In terms of the new interpretation of Disney's classic princess image, the cultural phenomenon of "princess on the run" reveals the impact of indigenous social thoughts and the development of new technologies on cultural localization in contemporary China. Critiques of 2020-released *Mulan*, represent the enhancement of Chinese cultural strength, a deeper understanding of local culture, and a new warning for cross-cultural companies. The discussion on the above issues shows the growing cultural confidence and new response to western culture in modern China.

**Keywords:** *Chinese culture, Localization, Culture difference, Cultural identity, Globalization*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Disney culture seems to have become a part of the new local culture of China, and people have a very high acceptance of this culture. Disney culture entered China by Mickey Mouse in 1930, and as the mainstream of popular culture at that time, it attracted a large number of Chinese people and had a strong appeal to all ages. The witty cartoon characters were not only popular with children, but also with parents who took their children to watch cartoons. Lu Xun, the famous author, took his wife and children to Shanghai's Guanglu Theater in 1933 to watch The Disney animation Mickey Mouse. With the development of time, nowadays Disney is still the pop culture in China, but now people's view of it has changed. The way young Chinese interpret Disney culture has changed a lot, and Disney culture seems to become a new kind of local culture in China with local interpretation. In the past research, a lot of literature on cultural localization and cultural globalization mainly focus on the situation of cultural export in developing countries and some advantages and disadvantages of cultural globalization in the context of globalization. However, in some rapidly developing countries, especially China, there is a lack of corresponding

research on the current cultural innovations. After China's reform and opening up, the great changes in the domestic cultural environment due to the enhanced cultural strength, new cultural communication needs. In terms of the study of Disney films, most of them are about the description of the "cultural hegemony" in the early 1980s, while there is little analysis and research on the cultural localization in contemporary China. Moreover, in modern times most of the literature on the occurrence of such changes is stating phenomena and discusses different phenomena separately. This paper uses the method of case study to analyze the new responses to Disney culture in China and discuss the causes behind it to a certain extent. By exploring the new trend of the Chinese people and discussing the relationship between native culture and media, it provides a global trend towards diversity, raise a point about finding global cultural exchange fusion at the same time retain local cultural characteristics.

## 2. POSITIVE RESPONSE INSTEAD OF NEGATIVE ACCEPTANCE OF DISNEY CULTURE

In the course of the development of Chinese culture in the 20th century, the emergence, development, and

reform of contemporary mainstream thought are closely related to western culture. With the wave of reform and opening up, people seek their own cultural identity by embracing western cultural products in various fields. In the initial stage, Disney movies entered the Chinese cultural market, people fully accepted the cultural interpretation of images, while Snow White, Mickey Mouse, and other images were very popular and household names. At this point, people are more appreciative and enjoy the great novelty brought by it.

### ***2.1 Growing culture confidence in contemporary China***

A country's local cultural strength and the development of a cultural environment have a profound impact on people's attitudes and views of foreign culture. The improvement of cultural strength caused by the construction of Chinese native culture is the fundamental guarantee for the interpretation and criticism of foreign re-construction. After China's reform and opening up, the internal culture of China has undergone tremendous changes. Especially since the 18th generation of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the prospect of Chinese cultural development and the important ideas of Chinese cultural development and construction will take enhancing cultural confidence, cultural responsibility, and enhancing cultural soft power as the entry point (Xi Jin Ping, 2011). Correspondingly, due to the entertainment industry and cultural performance accessible to Chinese people at all levels, the overall acceptance and understanding of Chinese culture has been enhanced, and the soft power of local culture has also been enhanced.

In recent years, there has been widespread cultural awareness and confidence in China. Based on absorbing and digesting the western literary theory, China has gradually explored a road of contemporary literary theory construction integrating and co-existing with the West. In the contemporary context, The Chinese people try to establish a fluid cultural standpoint, and look at foreign cultures critically, to promote the development of their own culture. This is a shift from acceptance to symbiosis, accompanied by an increase in the soft power of Chinese culture. China's acceptance of western cultural products is rapidly deepening and diversifying.

### ***2.2 New demand for Western cultural products***

The Chinese public has a new demand for Western cultural products: from high praise to reinterpretation, to criticism after reflection. The reinterpretation of Disney's indigenous cultural image is not just mechanical, passive acceptance, or simple pop worship. This is in keeping with China's cultural and social development. On this basis, these interpretations are creative and innovative. At the same time, people also

show a trend of cultural criticism: no longer blindly praise, but based on their own cultural position to establish a critical response.

## **3. "PRINCESS ON THE RUN": LOCAL CULTURE INTERPRETATION OF DISNEY AESTHETICS**

Disney culture, as one of the well-known foreign cultures in China, has inevitably been interpreted in a new way as the development of China. "Princess on the run", as a term created by Chinese net citizens, was prevalent in Chinese main online platforms. net citizens use this term to describe the real-life female characters with princess-related traits. Due to the prevalence of Disney movies and the repeated appearance of the classical images, and new meaning of princess is more and more widely applicable, as long as there is something similar to the Disney princess, can be called "runaway princess".

### ***3.1 An extended interpretation of Disney princesses in contemporary China***

Take the celebrities Zhang Han Yun as an example, Ms. Zhang, 32, has been described as a ' 'Disney princess on the run' ', and not because she's played Disney princesses and is as beautiful as Disney princesses on performing: her adherence to music and the fabulous performance (Ma Xiao Ran,2021). Not only her, but the words have also been widely used to describe glamorous female stars, female athletes competing in the Tokyo Olympics, and even women who shared moral characters in everyday life.

Its concept changed more than itself and was given a new definition under China context. In traditional Disney movies, Disney princesses are often portrayed as the one in a million, who are born out of the ordinary and though the image changed a few it' s still the collection of great virtues and always show up astonishingly. Specifically, "princess on the run" is commonly used to describe an act of rebellion in which a lady of noble birth runs away for freedom or love against others' decisions and seeks her own identity. In the present context "On the run does not only mean running away but that the object has the same qualities or characteristics as the central phrase. In this case, the word could be easily applied to any female image who share similar traits.

### ***3.2 The Response of Contemporary Chinese Feminist Social Thoughts to Disney Princess Culture***

What people pursue is not only the equal rights of women and men but also the development of women's "independent personality". With the development of the

economy and the influx of feminist trends of thought, people's concepts about females have been extended to independent individuals and their self-values. They fill with strong self-esteem, care for their characteristics and needs, and express themselves. At this time, women are not dependent on their families but have their financial resources and the ability to live independently. People's expectations for the role of princess add the image of the true, good, and beautiful princess in the classics, as well as the image of courage, independence, and rebellious spirit, which is more in line with real-life and people's spiritual needs. People's definition of the princess has become blurred and adapted to the general public, which also reflects the female personality consciousness development in China. The multi-level interpretation of classic images reflected in the culture of "Princess on the Run" is the epitome of China's present women's multiple and rich personality consciousness.

### ***3.3 Technological progress promotes the development of cultural response***

Additionally, the innovations of digital devices also play a role. According to the reform and opening up, with the development and dissemination of Chinese culture at home and abroad, Chinese local culture has ushered in a new climax with the dissemination of new media. New media technology has expanded and enriched mass cultural activities and improved people's acceptance of culture and lowered the threshold of content adaptation and dissemination. Due to the breakthrough of regional restrictions, people with various cultural shocks in the cultural environment not only enhanced people's acceptance and tolerance of information for a long time but also diversified cultural experience provided soil for cultural recreation. The lowering of the threshold for cultural producers has also spawned a large number of online careers, with practitioners and producers from different backgrounds providing more ideas and possibilities for new interpretations of Disney culture. In this process, the masses gradually become the subject of cultural production, and the cultural discourse is more used to describe the lives of the masses.

In short, Disney culture, as a carrier and technology of cultural communication, is a manifestation of China's acceptance of Western civilization and values. In the process of acceptance, it is transformed by Chinese people, forming the phenomenon of mixed culture, namely "cultural localization". At the same time, as a medium of artistic expression, the content and output of core values displayed in the film are also the points that people will consider when watching the film.

## **4. "MULAN" IN THE COLD FIELD: LOCAL RESPONSES TO DISNEY'S EXOTIC RECONSTRUCTION.**

Mulan, in its first 24 hours, the live-action trailer racked up 175.1 million online views worldwide, 52 million of which came from China. However, its data was much worse than in foreign countries when it was released in China mainland, and the score was relatively low. After the premiere in China 2020, its score was low to 4.9 and the majority (36.7%) gave 2 stars in Douban, one of the biggest movie rating websites in China until now. Whereas, the Aladdin released in 2019 was scored as 7.4 as another culture reconstruction product. Behind the low rating, except the disappointment of high expectations for the film and the filming techniques and plot settings of the film itself, the criticism about the distortion of local culture and history is the most common complaint about the film.

### ***4.1 Misunderstanding of Eastern Culture in Western Society***

In the process of globalization of Disney films, the cross-cultural communication of Disney films also depicts stories under different cultural backgrounds. For that cultural inheritance and re-creation products, normally result in much cultural imagination and permeate many factors such as cultural conflict, cultural filtering, and cultural identity transformation [1]. While there may be graphical and technical advances, the Mulan story they created may be far from the current tastes and values of Chinese people.

For the cultural elements reflected, Disney messed up the historical background of Mulan. Like the setting, the costumes are overly exaggerated and are not consistent with the story background. The buildings appeared in the beginning, the Tulou. The poem of Mulan is a folk song of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The "real" Mulan in the original poem hailed from China's northern steppe, would never have lived in a Tulou, the round, earthen buildings that are the traditional homes for the ethnic Hakka people in the far south.

Moreover, Fujian Tulou originated in The Song and Yuan dynasties and matured in the Ming and Qing dynasties, so it cannot have appeared in the Northern Wei Dynasty thousands of years ago. Even the artillery guns of the Song Dynasty appear to gather in the movie during the Huns war in the Qin and Han centuries. The dislocation of the times and social characteristics is undoubtedly the result of Disney's misunderstanding of the cultural context in the era of Chinese culture. This is a puzzle of fragmentary understanding of Chinese culture and infinite imagination of American style (Yu Yu-Cheng) The misinterpretation was just only a superficially consistent view of China, not based on the facts, which is similar

to the Orientalism built up only through some symbols and imagination in the colonial period, without the reflection of truth but full of fantasy.

What received more critiques is about the wizard and the uses of chi. One word that is frequently used in the film is "chi." Mulan's father says that chi is for men who are warriors, and women have to hide it or they will be considered witches. In Chinese Kung Fu, Chi is similar to internal force cultivation, which requires slow cultivation to deepen and everybody gets access to it with work. However, the movie sets that Mulan is gifted from the moment she comes out, with a powerful "chi" in her body that is different from ordinary people. She can hide it when she doesn't need it, and she can press the switch to release it at any time when she needs it as the movie goes on, which sounds very magical. Chi sounds similar to the Force in Star Wars, Chakra in Naruto, which is not being presented in the original text. The film captures and confuses a concept of Chinese elements to make it sound like Mulan's own extraordinary superpowers.

As for the storyline, the re-created Mulan diverged from the original China Mulan poetry. The "Mulan" is originally a story about an ordinary girl, through her efforts to grow up gradually to be a hero finally recognized by the nation. She knew she was not as strong as a man physically, but she bears the responsibility to join the army for her father for the whole family and filial piety showing. Those are the story of the "Mulan" kernels. The traditional Mulan story is a story of inheritance and rebellion. She inherited the values in ancient china society, while joining the army, masculine actions are the rebellion and the awakening of self-awareness. In the Disney film, Mulan is portrayed as a superwoman with a gift and a powerful "chi" hidden inside her. The characters around her, from the fairy maiden to the Governor of Dong to the emperor, all seem to serve as a tool for Mulan's role in guiding her gradual awakening. The characters are not full of personality and descriptions are monotonous. The film taps into the current wave of female empowerment in Hollywood, as Disney has done with other great movies about women with superpowers. The Chinese would be more receptive if Disney recreated a new movie IP with a Chinese female protagonist. However, in a country with growing cultural power, it is clear that many Chinese viewers do not like the idea of revising traditional content without respecting facts

Those costumes, props, architecture, and the misunderstanding of the definition of Chi that do not respect Chinese history are not the most criticized part of the film. More importantly, Disney failed to understand the spiritual core of Mulan, and the narration of women's rights in Mulan failed to reflect the key. Feminism is not that women have superpowers (Chi) that dominate a battlefield full of male characters, but

that women can fight with men on a battlefield exclusively for men. However, in the local Chinese stories, the description of Mulan who has a strong sense of responsibility and tries to improve herself in a battlefield full of men has already reflected the core of women's rights. On the contrary, the changes made by Disney to satisfy enough drama as a film not only deviated from the original story but also failed to well express real women's rights, It's like a self-righteous depiction of Chinese culture and exploration and realization of American style self-worth and heroism, full of exotic reconstruction [2].

#### ***4.2 Contemporary China's cultural resistance to misunderstandings from the West***

All the criticism about Mulan is evidence of cultural self-assistance. The deeper and more direct critical speech is more dependent on the development of national cultural soft power, the prosperity of local culture, and cultural consciousness [3]. Mr. Fei Xiaotong puts forward the view of cultural consciousness given some provocative thoughts of the new culture. He pointed out that cultural consciousness means that people have self-knowledge of culture in daily life and can have a systematic cognition of development, prospect, and history. The Chinese researchers' self-examination of their own culture reflected behind Mulan's film is a good confirmation of this concept. This is also a harmonious cultural concept under the environment of global integration. When The Chinese understand their cultural characteristics, take the essence and discard the dregs, and carry out foreign culture research. Only through such comparison and research, can there be space for mutual communication, to effectively carry out cultural globalization and maintain the characteristics of local culture itself.

The reaction showed by Mulan in China is a warning for Disney movies in globalization as well. "We didn't want to make Mulan a Chinese film, because we are not Chinese, we have different sensibilities and different narrative styles," said the assistant director of the film. This shows that the cultural misreading and imagination reflected in Mulan is no accident. Disney has blurred Mulan's cultural boundaries and turned it into a carrier of American popular values dressed in traditional Chinese culture. In this context, what The Chinese see as a chaotic historical background becomes logical in Disney World. In the form of film, it eliminates the boundaries of time and space, history and culture, dispels and filters the spirit of "loyalty and filial piety" embodied in local culture, and endows new connotations of individual heroism and feminism. The process of such regional culture being processed and accepted by different global cultures is the process of cultural globalization. Hollywood's film industry is arguably the best in the world, with its ability to turn any mediocre

script into a blockbuster through technology. But if it loses the ability to understand and embrace other cultures, if it only focuses on selling points of its products and ignores its original culture, it will be fatal in cross-cultural artistic creation. This leads directly to the creation of a "self-righteous" product, a system that calls itself in its logic, but which probably has fewer takers as globalization advances.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the era of globalization, Chinese people have shown a new demand for western culture: they need both the affirmation of the western mainstream and the export of their own national culture. Local cultures strive to develop and inherit the national culture, grasp the cultural core. While exporting culture to the world, it should be neither humble nor overbearing, but it should not resist cultural input from other countries without any reason. Telling the stories of own nation well and is the true reflection of cultural confidence and it is something that local countries can strive for in the process of globalization. The controversy over the two cultures also reflects a new problem behind globalization as many local cultures are gaining strength. In the context of globalization, as new requirements come from different markets, multinational cultural companies need to change the form and depth of artistic presentation of local culture and make it more suitable and acceptable for locals. After all, what is irreconcilable may not be the aesthetic difference between regions, but the natural conflict between commerce and culture.

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