

Reinventing Chinese Legend in the Age of Global Hollywood: A Comparative Critique of the Cinematic Representations of Disney's Mulan

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Disney has launched the production of a series of live-action princess films in an attempt to rejuvenate the popularity of this renowned animation franchise: one of Disney's most ambitious remakes was the live-action version of *Mulan*, which was released worldwide in 2021 amidst the global pandemic. Although it was considered one of the most highly anticipated films of the year, *Mulan* failed to live up to the expectations of both Chinese and Western audiences. At the same time, disputes over the animated *Mulan* film reemerged and were soon intensified on the internet. Many have attributed the live-action film's floundering box office performance to the inevitable cultural difference between China and the West. That said, this essay focuses on this distinct global cultural phenomenon, and analyzes controversies over the making of the two "Mulan films" from the aspects of aesthetics, spiritual core, and historical factors. As this essay observes, "Mulan" has been a cultural epitome of the transnational collaboration between China and the US across many levels since the late 20th century, and the two "Mulan films" are indicators of how Hollywood attempts to stimulate the Chinese film market.

Keywords: *Mulan; Disney; Remake; Transnational Cinema; Chinese Film Market*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Hollywood's global dominance since the early 2000s, Walt Disney Company decided to launch a series of multimedia campaigns to promote the transnational popularity of some of its most famous princesses. Often featured in the form of films, animation, and other cultural commodities, the image of those princesses has gradually entered people's everyday life. In spite of the fact that the concept of the Disney princess was invented in 1937 following the US premiere of *Snow White*, public discussions about them have continued to thrive. In its eighty-four years of historical development, Disney Princesses who were created by artists and filmmakers during different times are closely related to the historical periods that they were associated with. For example, the title character Snow White from the animated film which was made in 1937 she becomes the first Disney princess that is known for her kindness and gentleness. In fact, the early Disney princesses are basically famous for their stereotyped female characteristics including the

manifestation of family-centered values, kindness, and their need for man to change their identity and fate.

Due to the improvement of women's status since the 20th century, Disney is inclined to shoot films that are more progressive in order to reflect women's image. The live-action remake of *Mulan* released in 2020 is certainly a vivid illustration of the company's turn to a more progressive as well as more culturally appealing portrayal of one of its most popular princesses amid the rapid expansion of Disney's global dominance. Needless to say, the live-action remake of *Mulan* has attracted attention from all around the globe. According to an article in *The Global Times*, it said that [1] "When audiences in the United States and China learned that *Mulan* was being developed into a live-action film, they looked forward to the film with high anticipations". [2] *Mulan*'s first preview was released during the half-time of the FIFA Women's World Cup, with 175.1 million hits worldwide in 24 hours, ranking seventh in the number of hits on the first day of the history of film trailers. Furthermore, *Mulan*'s preview ranked second

in the history of previews for Disney's live-action films. The upcoming release of *Mulan* undoubtedly brings unprecedented expectations to all audiences. Surprisingly, the live-action *Mulan* released in 2020 has disappointed all the audiences. For the Chinese audiences, this version of Hua Mulan is different from what they had hoped for. Many Chinese expected Disney's 2020 *Mulan* to be a historically accurate depiction of the heroine, exemplifying a character of anti-Asian stereotype. Therefore, this paper will compare Disney's live-action *Mulan* (2020) with the animated version of *Mulan* (1999) through the method of comparative study. By conducting a comparative analysis of the two films across different levels, this paper argues that the critical success of the animated *Mulan* should not only be attributed to the ever-closer socioeconomic relationship between the two countries during the early 21st century, its popularity also benefited from the film's faithful reference and presentation of classical Chinese aesthetics, traditional Confucian thoughts, and feminist beliefs.

2. DIFFERENCES IN NARRATIVE STRUCTURES AND CINEMATIC AESTHETICS

2.1. From Animation to Live-Action

Audiences will always have a personal preference for the film they want to watch as they enter the cinema. Such an assertion is also applicable to the comparative study of the two 'Mulan' films. Audiences expect to see a work that not only shows Mulan's growth arc as a Disney character, but also her manifestations of feminist values as an Asian heroine. Despite the fact that both films were produced by Disney, it seems that audiences do not appreciate the 2020 live-action version of *Mulan*. In this light, a number of questions arise: What are some factors that contributed to the audiences' negative review of the 2020 *Mulan*? Why does the animated *Mulan* remain a favorable research subject for film critics, scholars, and historians? Why does the audience still not enjoy the live-action *Mulan* which inherits, draws inspiration from, and pays homage to the visual elements of the animation version?

In this section, I articulate the animated representation of the aesthetic achievement and gave compelling arguments for capturing classical Chinese cultural elements. In the live-action *Mulan*, mythical characters such as Mushu the dragon are removed from the storyline: comedic effects that were previously triggered by the installment of those mythical characters could no longer be found in the live-action *Mulan*. Therefore, the animated *Mulan* is even more compelling as the film is touched by a fantastical undertone. Meanwhile, live-action *Mulan* is adapted from the animated *Mulan* but discards many excellent elements

in the previous version. For the unprepared audience, the overall film texture is chaotic.

To begin with, *Mulan* (1998) based on a Chinese folklore legend, tells a story of universal significance, which can be understood by audiences in any countries around the globe. To many, *Mulan* the animated film is filled with comedic moments, down-to-earth portrayal of human emotions, and catchy music scores. Although Mushu the dragon is a fictional character of mythic origin that was solely created by the hands of the Disney talents, Mushu and others mythical characters in the animated *Mulan* can always remind the audiences that this is a mythical fairy tale, which is fictional. Many cultural critics, both from China and the US, have argued that *Mulan* the animated film could be viewed as a faithful reimagination of the original Chinese poem titled *Ballad of Mulan*. Coupled with the occasional singing and dancing scenes, *Mulan* the animated film not only embodies the literary core of *Ballad of Mulan* but also delivers an entertaining viewing experience for the audiences.

On account of its aesthetic achievement, *Mulan* the animated film is also impressive. According to a film critic on IMDB, [3] "the animation [*Mulan*] is, by now, expected to be great, and *Mulan* certainly lives up to the great Disney tradition." Audiences could easily distinguish *Mulan* from the supporting characters since the colors of her clothe were purposefully designed by filmmakers at Disney. For instance, When *Mulan* went to see the matchmaker, all the young women were wearing gorgeous pink clothes. For the filmmakers to emphasize *Mulan*'s individualistic impulse, they gave *Mulan* a bright pink dress with a higher hue. In contrast with other male soldiers, *Mulan* in the combat scenes always wears deeper green armor. By giving *Mulan* an armor with a touch of profound greenness, *Mulan*'s calmness and intelligence on the battlefield are vividly implied through such a deliberate choice of clothing color. Moreover, *Mulan* the animated film also reveals many visual characteristics that resemble the aesthetics of classical Chinese painting. The artistic design of *Mulan*'s horse in the animated film resembles Xu Beihong's galloping horse.



Figure 1, Xu Beihong’s famous Chinese brush painting of a horse.



Figure 2 Mulan’s horse that looks like the panting works of XU beihong’s.

Moreover, the visuality of the smoke in *Mulan* is similar to the cloud totem in traditional Chinese aesthetics.



Figure 3 a snap shot of the battle scene in *Mulan* the animated film.



Figure 4, The smoke of gunpowder in the animated *Mulan*.



Figure 5, A pictorial display of the propitious cloud totem.

propitious cloud totem symbolizes luck and harmony in ancient China. The above-mentioned visual symbols of classical Chinese aesthetics have better contributed to *Mulan*’s formation of a reinvented eastern-outlook. Given that *Mulan* was shot in a 2D format, it could better illustrate the distinct aesthetic elements of classical Chinese landscape painting. Therefore, under the impression of being the most powerful entertainment company in Hollywood and the world, it has not only been welcomed by the audience, but also praised by critics.

In contrast to the animated version, live-action *Mulan* has been said to have failed at creating an artistic image of ancient China that is both culturally acceptably by the Chinese and historically accurate in accordance with the *Ballad of Mulan*. According to reports written by the *Wall Street Journal*, Disney also invited relevant Chinese departments to review the script to ensure that there were no potential risks regarding historical accuracy. [4] According to people familiar with the creative process, opinions given by China’s film authorities included that this film should not focus on a specific dynasty. But in the end, the creative team’s effort in trying to restore the *Mulan* story’s historical accuracy seems to have achieved the

opposite result. The most obvious change is that the live-action *Mulan* deliberately removed not only scenes of singing and dancing, but also the installment of anthropomorphic animal Characters such as the Mushu – such a narrative choice undoubtedly undermines the comedic effect of the film. In order to deploy a more realistic approach to the Mulan story, the creative team had also added massive detailed depicting of the combat scene. Furthermore, they even have more Original settings, for instance, the installment of the witch, a new character played by Gong Li, and the use of the concept of ‘Qi.’ Although the film has added a large number of martial arts scenes, the effect is chaotic, and the battlefield background lacks a sense of historicity. Compared with previous Hollywood-produced Chinese films such as *Crouching tiger, hidden dragon*, and *hero*, the live-action version of *Mulan* does not have the distinct visuality of a Chinese martial art film. That said, the creative team’s attempt at the restoration of a sense of historical accuracy is considered superficial – the overly exaggerated character costumes and makeups, the removal of the anthropomorphic animal character Mushu, and many other minor changes have therefore caused the box office failure of the 2020 *Mulan* film.

3. BALANCE BETWEEN CONFUCIANISM AND FEMINISM

3.1. Filial Piety, Liberal Feminism, and Cultural Appropriation

The animated *Mulan* not only inherits the thought of loyalty and filial piety from *Ballad of Mulan* but also injects the thought of progressive beliefs. The right balance between the two ideas enables audiences all over the world to resonate with them. However, the live-action *Mulan* tends to be different from the previous work, so it deliberately strengthens the discussion of feminism. But with the addition of “Qi” and witches, Mulan changed from an ordinary person to a gifted superhero. This sudden change in setting has separated the film from the depth of feminism, which has also become a problem criticized by the global audience, especially the Chinese audience.

[5] “But when the two rabbits run side by side, how can you tell the female from the male?” – this verse comes from *The Ballad of Mulan*, a classical Chinese poem written during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Although it is impossible to verify whether there was a female warrior named Mulan in Chinese imperial history, the *Ballad of Mulan* has become a work that is filled with Confucian values after thousands of years of historical evolution. Though it has been said, throughout the course of dynastic Chinese history, that “Loyalty to the country and filial piety to the family is difficult to achieve at the same timer.” But Mulan was able to achieve both because Mulan first wanted to

serve her father and avoid his death on the battlefield, so she was further loyal to the country as a male identity. Hua Mulan’s devotion to both her family as well as the imperial state has successfully turned her into a distinct cultural embodiment and model of Confucian morality. When stories about Hua Mulan spread to the west since the early 20th century, this heroine became endowed with a layer of feminist thoughts because of the influence of three feminist movements taking place in the 19-early 20th centuries, the 1960s, and the around 1992 respectively. In this light, *Mulan* not only retains the original *Ballad of Mulan*’s moral emphasis on loyalty and filial piety but also instills thoughts of liberal feminism into its narrative. It is more emphasized that Mulan, as an ordinary woman from a civilian family, can also achieve what men can do through her dedication and hard work. Besides, in order to avoid the audience’s misunderstanding that Mulan’s female power is used to safeguard the patriarchal society, Disney’s storytellers cleverly implied that Mulan’s move to save the emperor is not out of loyalty, but result from Mulan’s belief that the emperor should also be regarded as a fellow man who needs help. In essence, *Mulan*’s dramatic tension focuses on the reconciliation between the patriarchal ethical concept of “filial piety” and the self-realization of a non-traditional Chinese woman. It is for this reason that this version of Mulan has achieved both box office success and critical celebration.

But Disney’s live-action adaptation of *Mulan* is not as successful as the animated version. First of all, the production team wants to recreate an ancient China that is similar to the imagination in the animated *Mulan*; Second, they also seek to ground the film’s aesthetic textural in a more realistic tone by eliminating scenes of singing and dancing while adding several new narrative elements. The aforementioned two approaches to the live-action *Mulan*’s production design are undoubtedly in conflict with each other: if the creative team aims to seriously discuss and praise liberal feminism in the *Mulan* story, then the restructured image of ancient China certainly would only draw criticism among scholars for it makes the film a work of cultural appropriation. For instance, the locality is somewhat confusing to audiences who are familiar with Chinese history. Although the exact, historically accurate location of Mulan’s hometown is still a subject of countless debates among contemporary historians, the story is widely acknowledged to be about her courageous defense against the Huns. That said, the location of Mulan’s hometown is highly possible in northern China. However, in the live-action *Mulan*, filmmakers and set designers chose “Fujian Tulou (traditional wooden houses from Fujian province)” as the representative image of Mulan’s hometown, which would only appear in southern China. In addition, the use of the concept of “Qi,” and the inclusion of witches

in the live-action *Mulan* seem to inadvertently deviate the main points of the film. Therefore, the audiences are inevitably disappointed for they find themselves more identified with the animated *Mulan* film. Even if Chinese and American audiences criticized the 2020 film from different points of view, audiences of the two countries do not appreciate the adaptation of this live-action version of Mulan.

4. GLOBAL POLITICS, BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE, AND THE TWO MULAN FILMS

4.1. Glimpse into the Changing Sino-US Relationship

The changes in Sino-US relations over the past two decades have also affected the reputation and box office of the two works. The harmonious dialogue exchange between China and the US in the 1990s has risen to the ideological struggle between the two countries. Moreover, Disney was banned by the Chinese government because of inappropriate political factors from *Kundun*. This effect the delay of *Mulan* (1998) in China until 1999, followed by the flooded pirated copies, which affected the box office.

Generally speaking, differences between the two versions of *Mulan* have provoked heated topics among Chinese and American audiences since the release of the Disney animation in 1998. For *Mulan* (1998), through five years of on-the-spot research on a wide range of topics related to the story of Mulan in the Chinese context, the creative team was able to produce a film that could truly capture classical Chinese aesthetics, and restore them to the silver screen. Because of the creative team's ingenuity, *Mulan* was a success in China, attracting numerous Chinese audiences to go to the cinema to see this Disney film. At that time, most of the Chinese children naturally thought *Mulan* (1998) was a film made in China. In contrast, the production of the 2020 film hoped that such an adaptation could give the live-action film a realistic touch. However, the overall effect is chaotic and inconsistent with the expectations of the audience. In terms of the production quality of the two films, audiences all over the world generally prefer the animated version of Mulan. As a result, differences in their production qualities have led to a large difference in their reception. To be sure, the reality is that the two *Mulan* films released twenty-two years apart both have failed to achieve the expected box office results within their times.

5. CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-WESTERN CULTURES IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL HOLLYWOOD

This paper analyzes the political ideals that Hua Mulan is expected to convey as well as embody, and the texture of the two films, articulating the aesthetic obstacles filmmakers had encountered as they tried to adapt the Chinese folklore legend into animation and live-action films. Specifically, this article studies the two versions of Mulan through an examination of the following three components: the difference between the aesthetic characteristic in two films; the Confucianism and feminism in two versions of Mulan; the impact of Sino-US relations on two films.

In reality, the two films were respectively affected by their designated periods. When the two films were released, the animated *Mulan* got delayed, and the 2020 live-action film was affected by the global pandemic of COVID-19. This shows that the reality is full of unpredictable as well as precarious factors that could potentially damage a film's box office performance. In addition, due to China's growing film market potential, many major foreign film companies want a share. But the instability affects the film market: because of China's strict censorship, foreign films' potential success in the Chinese market is often contingent. Based on the box office performance of the two *Mulan* films in China, it can be seen that the Chinese market is very demanding for imported films with an Eastern image or an Eastern perspective.

In 2020, in order to continue stimulating the Chinese market, Disney chose to integrate Marvel's original hero Shang-Chi into its film universe. Today, Disney's Marvel cinematic universe includes more than a dozen comic-to-screen adaptations. This shows that Marvel is very confident in Shang-Chi's global influence and its probability of success. However, *Shang-Chi* (2020) has not even been released in mainland China because of the historical prejudice against to Chinese in their early comics. The fundamental reason is either because of China's government's protection for local productions or because there are controversial elements in Shang-Chi's original comics. The latter reason has aroused strong resistance from some Chinese audiences. In any case, Hollywood films' representation of the East is bound to change in the future. Therefore, in the near future, this topic will continue to be discussed. However, it can be understood based on my analysis of Disney's two *Mulan* adaptations that no matter how western studios adapt Chinese stories or Chinese elements, they cannot be approved and satisfied by Chinese audiences from all around the globe. Thus, the global film market remains in search of more diverse representations of non-western cultures and stories.

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