

# Transculturation & Transnational Feminism: A Case Study on the Difference between *Mulan*(1998), *Mulan*( 2020), & Original Chinese Version of Mulan Ballad

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## ABSTRACT

*Mulan* (1998) & *Mulan* (2020), two Disney films based on a Chinese ballad, is well-known example of transculturation. In the process of transculturation, cultural distortions and deformation happen. This culture appropriation has gained success in the global market but with the dissatisfaction of the Chinese. This case study will explore the difference between *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan* (2020), and Mulan Ballad. It will also talk about the western ideology which west arrogantly takes its ideology as the standard which leads to the wrong understanding of feminism in Mulan Ballad. Therefore, they falsely ignore identity politics in the Chinese context.

**Keywords:** *Mulan*(1998), *Mulan* (2020), *Mulan* Ballad, *Transculturation*, *Transnational Feminism*, *Universalism*, *Individualism*, *Filial Piety*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the first *Mulan* film was produced by Disney, and it was very influential globally especially in the U.S. There were 120.6 million dollars were from the U.S and it was the 12th rank in U.S. domestic office in 1998 [1]. However, in China, the box office was under 2 million dollars [2]. In the U.S, *Mulan* was very popular with female audiences, because *Mulan* was a feminist role launched by Disney based on the ideology of the American middle class. She was regarded by many American women as a “role model princess”. Contrary to American praise, Chinese audiences were very dissatisfied with *Mulan* because it is generally believed that *Mulan* was an American girl dressed in Chinese elements, and Chinese culture was not well respected [1]. Disney as a world-renowned American company will inevitably adopt some transcultural strategies in order to cater the global market when telling a Chinese folk story. In this process of transculturation, Disney distorted some of the Chinese culture to a certain extent. I submit that Disney as the one who “speak for others”, mistakenly used universalism and ignored the political identity of the Chinese people which leads to the contribution of a culture of misogyny. However, although

the portrayal of feminism and traditional Chinese values in the film is a false understanding of *Mulan* Ballad, it does not mean people can only speak for themselves to avoid the danger of speaking for others. This paper will also focus on explaining the reasons for the differences between the eastern and western evaluation of polarization. The major contribution of previous studies for this paper is from Jing. Y talks about feminism in *Mulan*, Lu. W which focuses on *Mulan*’s globalization, Xu. M, Tian. C which emphasis on cultural deformations of Disney’s *Mulan* in English and Chinese, and Volpp states identity politics. The core difference between this paper and the previous study is this paper will compare *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan* (2020) & the original Chinese version of the *Mulan* ballad while the previous study only compare *Mulan*(1998) & *Mulan* ballad. This paper will elaborate on the Disney version of *Mulan* constitutes universalism. The paper is be divided into five parts which are transculturation in the context of globalization, background of *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan* (2020), and Chinese *Mulan* Ballad, comparison between *Mulan*( 1998), *Mulan*(2020), and *Mulan* Ballad, *Mulan* (2020), individualism & feminism in *Mulan*( 1998) & *Mulan*(2020), and speaking for others & transnational feminism..

## 2. TRANSCULTURATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization requires cultural appropriation and distortion in the process of transculturation between the West and the East. According to Wang, the term transculturation originally came from the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1947, meaning cultural merging and converging [3]. It is beneficial for globalization since it can eliminate cultural antagonism and ethnic conflicts through one culture adapting to and incorporating another culture via modification, localization, and the creation of new cultures [4]. *Mulan (1998)* & *Mulan (2020)*, two films based on a Chinese ballad, are well-known examples of transculturation.

However, Wang claims there is also a negative impact for transculturation which is the cultural misappropriation and distortions [3]. In this context of cultural distortions, Chan also defines transculturation as "a process whereby a culture is transformed by another for self-aggrandizement" [5]. It indicates that transculturation in this case becomes a type of self-interest. Xiaoqi. Y claims transculturation causes all regional traditional cultures have become commodities in supermarkets which can be freely selected and tampered with thus infringing on the original culture [6]. *Mulan (1998)* & *Mulan (2020)* contains cultural distortions which will be described in detail in the latter part of the essay.

In film production, transculturation is mainly based on the consideration of economic interests. Wang claims that during the process of transculturation, cultural globalization and cultural localization are included and eventually form the phenomenon of "glocalization" raised by Roland Roberson [3]. In other words, "glocalization" means the process of regional culture is transformed to be accepted by different cultures around the world coexist with the process of one local culture creating new culture when they learn from a foreign culture. So, it is impossible for globalization to overwhelm local culture, vice versa [3]. Disney as a huge global company that focuses on globalized films inevitably encounters the problems brought by glocalization. Rogers states that Disney owns the free choice for cultural localization, but cultural globalization is a force for other cultures [7]. *Mulan*, like a Disney film, has an unshakable worldwide commercial position. There is an impassable chasm between other cultures' reputations, marketing, and influence and Disney's. As a consequence of this discrepancy, other cultures are forced to embrace Disney's goods [4]. Disney leverages its privilege to achieve discourse hegemony and profits from it, while other cultures endure offense. Both *Mulan (1998)* and *Mulan (2020)* are examples since they were encountered opposition in China and did not gain an enthusiastic response from the box office.

## 3. BACKGROUND OF MULAN (1998)& MULAN(2020)

The project *Mulan* was first started in 1994 by Disney-MGM Studios in Orlando, Florida. This project was a combination of the movie called *China Doll* which talks about a western prince save a Chinese girl who are being oppressed and the *Mulan Ballad* [4]. A team consisting of artistic supervisors was sent to China for three weeks to gain inspiration and make records for Chinese traditional landmarks. After the investigation in China, the producer decided to adapt the original *Mulan Ballad* in order to make the film cater to the American market. After five years' production, the film *Mulan(1998)* was released by Walt Disney Pictures in June 1998. It earned many awards includes Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations, Best Animated Feature for Annie Awards [4]. The story is started with the matchmaker saying *Mulan* did not abide by women's morality was a disgrace to the family. During this time, the citizens were informed that the Huns which was led by Shan Yu invade imperial Han China and they were required by the emperor to have one man in one family to join the army. *Mulan's* elderly father Fa Zhou as the only man in his family had to fight again although he was injured. *Mulan* knew that if her father took part in the war he might have no return. In order to save her father, she decided to cut off her hair, stole her father's armor and sword, and pretended to be the man "Fa Ping" to join the army for her father. During the war, *Mulan* made an avalanche with the enemy's cannon and buried the enemy. Her real gender was revealed when her wound was bandaged, and then she was expelled from the military camp instead of being executed by captain Li Shang. *Mulan* found that Shan Yu was still alive and planned to sneak into the imperial city so she told Shang Li the news. Their cooperation finally defeated the Huns. The emperor was very grateful to her. At this time, Shang Li realized his feelings for *Mulan*, so he went to *Mulan's* hometown and *Mulan's* parents were very happy so they invited Shang Li to stay and have dinner. Once *Mulan(1998)* was released, the film immediately achieved a very good response which was \$304 million worldwide, and even achieved the second-highest box office of family films. However, in China, it grossed less than US\$2 million and at the box office [2]. Because of having the bedding of success of *Mulan (1998)* in the global context, Disney started shooting a live-action version of *Mulan* in 2018. The main character *Mulan* was selected among 1,000 candidates and finally, Yifei Liu became the one. The film was filmed mostly in New Zealand and Xinjiang, China. The timeline of this *Mulan* is roughly the same as *Mulan (1998)*. The biggest difference is the character witch Xianniang which the previous version does not exist. She helped the villain character—leader of Rouran warriors, Böri Khan to invade the imperial city at the beginning because Böri Khan promised to give her a world that would treat her equally. However, Xianniang

eventually saved Mulan and betrayed Böri Khan because she was moved by Mulan's courage of expose her identity as a woman but having strong "Chi". *Mulan (2020)* grossed \$70 million worldwide and one of the biggest reasons for this failure was the pandemic.

### **3.1 Background of Chinese Mulan Ballad**

Mulan Ballad is one of the oldest stories in China which talks about a female warrior fight for the Northern-Wei Dynasty. Mulan Ballad first appeared in the fourth century AD during the Wei-jin North-South period and was first recorded in the sixth century by Zhijiang's Gujin Yuelu. The most widely circulated and well-known version is Maoqian Guo's Yuefu Shiji [Collection of Music-Bureau Poems] during the 12 centuries in the Song dynasty. This version of Mulan is also included in elementary schools' textbooks of mainland China and all students are required to recite the Ballad [4]. Later in history, Mulan was adapted into many versions. For example, a writer in the Ming Dynasty called Xuwei adapted the title of Mulan Ballad into "a female Mulan joining the army for her father". This essay will use Maoqian Guo's version and translator Han H. Frankel's English version to do the comparison. The story of Mulan Ballad is about Mulan was weaving in her room. Suddenly she couldn't hear the sound of the loom. She could only hear her sigh. Because my father's name is on the conscription list, but she has no brother and father and no eldest son, she decided to join the army for my father. She went to the market to buy things for March and said goodbye to her parents in the morning. She has been missing her parents and hometown. After more than 10 years of war, she received rich rewards and high titles from the emperor, but she refused. She only wanted a horse that could return to her hometown. After returning to her hometown, she put on women's clothes and came out to see her former partners. Everyone exclaimed that she had lived together for 12 years, but she didn't know that Mulan was a woman. "The hare's feet go hop and skip, The she share's eyes are muddled and fuddled. Two hares running side by side close to the ground, how can they tell if I am he or she?" (Han H. Frankel's, 1976) [8].

### **3.2 Comparison between *Mulan(1998)*, *Mulan(2020)*, and *Mulan Ballad***

In genre aspect, *Mulan (1998)* is a cartoon musical movie and *Mulan (2020)* is a live-action movie with the element supernatural power "Chi". With the addition of witch Xianning, the structure of the plot becomes more similar to some European films that theme against dark magic, such as *Merlin*. In *Merlin's* story, magic is considered evil in Camelot. Mogana, the king's adopted daughter who was born with magic was not accepted by this land and finally had to become evil. In *Mulan (2020)* witch Xianning helped Böri Khan because Böri Khan told

her he could be brought "a place where your power will not be verified. A place where you are accepted for who you are". Xianning longed to be true to herself. On the other hand, Mulan's female identity was founded accidentally in *Mulan (1998)* but in *Mulan (2020)*, Mulan took the initiative to expose her female identity. This difference refers compare to *Mulan (1998)* which mainly focuses on true self, *Mulan (2020)* emphasizes that in order to be true one must be brave to self-exposure. In *Mulan (1998)*, the theme of true self attributes to not being willing to be a good wife for her husband and children but to be a female warrior galloping on the battlefield so as to realize herself. *Mulan (2020)* attributes "be true" as must having the courage to expose and recognize gender identity. *Mulan (2020)* tightly binds brave and true. It can be shown by Xianning mocked Mulan for not admitting that she is a woman and said, "then you will die pretending to be something you're not". After that Mulan looks at the Chinese characters engraved on the sword and her own face, then Mulan took off her armor, scattered her hair, and returned to the battlefield as an identity of woman. These changes in *Mulan (2020)* make the theme of Mulan emphasize more on individualism. The reason is Mulan in *Mulan (2020)* is no longer satisfied to be a female warrior silently in order to realize her true self but is not afraid to show everyone her true identity as a women warrior to realize the concept of "be true".

The most important difference between Mulan Ballad and two Mulan films is understating of feminism. Feminism in *Mulan (1998)* & *Mulan (2020)* indicates that emancipation of females must be embedded in individualism but in Mulan Ballad gender equality can be also gained by collectivistic feminism [1]. At the end of the Mulan Ballad, "the hare's feet go hop and skip... how can they tell if I am he or she" This shows that "Mulan Ballad downplays the gender differences" [1]. Feminism in Mulan Ballad is demonstrated by indicating Mulan's success in considering family and country ahead of herself and gender is not even important. In *Mulan (2020)*, this phrase of the hare was used to emphasize Mulan's disobedience to women's morality. After Mulan said "black wind and I rod alongside two raids running side by side. I think one was male, one was a female when they're running that fast" at the beginning of the film, Mulan's mother said with a disappointment and slightly angry facial expression that "the matchmaker has found you an Australian match". This phrase of fare does not mention in the 1998 version.

The concept of emancipation of female must be divorced from collective interests is a typical universalism which means individualism is the core of feminism and this applies to all cultures. Universalism fails to fulfill the identity politics of the Chinese. For identity politics, it refers to politics between people of various ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds. It is critical for a global company like Disney to notice the

identity politics because it protects women of color from being marginalized by the dominant political system. In both *Mulan* (1998) & *Mulan* (2020), they gloss over the identity politics of Chinese women who prioritize "a strong focus on family commitments" [9]. This cultural deformation of feminism "is ultimately unsatisfactory, for it replicates the idea that women are adequately defined as women solely through their experience of gender subordination" [10]. This implies that Disney establishes a single norm of identity politics centered on the west and ignores the diverse circumstances of "third world" women. As a result, the emphasis on individuality fails to respect Chinese women's identity politics and forces the individualism cherished by western women's rights to be incorporated into Chinese culture.

### **3.3 Distortion of filial piety between Chinese Mulan Ballad & Mulan (1998), Mulan (2020)**

One of the most important cultural distortions in the Chinese Mulan Ballad & *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan* (2020) is Mulan's enlistment in the army. In the original Chinese ballad, Mulan joined the army out of filial piety to her father, but the Disney version transformed it into a father-daughter familial love, as well as Mulan's pursuit of her true self [5]. According to Chinese scholars, the ballad Mulan originally belonged to the Xianbei culture of the Northern Wei. Unlike the southern ballads, the northern ballads tended to portray women as sturdy and tough. After it translated into the language that the Tang dynasty used, scholars claimed that "the theme of the Tang version not so much a gender issue as that of cultural obligation by a dutiful daughter for her parents" [11]. This was because filial piety was highly valued during the period of Confucius in Chinese culture. Filial piety is even viewed as the ultimate value in a Chinese family. However, when the Disney consultant and children's book writer Robert San Souci who calmed himself as an "adaptor" first retell the story of Mulan in English version, he changed the idea of filial piety into a gender issue. Thus, the original theme of Mulan was changed during this adaptation and the Disney version of Mulan continued to use this changed concept of Mulan "finding her true self" rather than the self-sacrifice for the filial piety [11]. This concept of "true self" is a western ideology that contradict with Chinese value — a collective sense of honor. Furthermore, filial piety is also be distorted as the honor of the family. In *Mulan*(1998), being a standard good daughter or wife is a kind of honor of the family; Mulan fight for her father also is for honor. In Confucianism, honor is not one of the traditional values. To gain honor shows the heroism in western culture.

### **3.4 Individualism & Feminism in Mulan (1998) & Mulan (2020)**

As an industry dominated by American ideology, Disney fragmented ethnic cultures and put them under the western narrative framework. Disney will also adjust and change the ethnic cultures according to the local ideology of the United States. Individualism and feminism in *Mulan* are typical examples. Kurtti mentions that Disney proclaims to turn *Mulan* into a universal classic, and Peter Schneider, Disney Feature Animation president, claims that searching for one's true self is a universal theme [1]. In both *Mulan* (1998) & *Mulan* (2020), the scene in *Mulan* sings "somehow I cannot hide who I am though I've tried" refers to her struggle of whether be a good daughter or her true self. In the song, *loyal brave true* by *Mulan* (2020), "who am I without my armor" also indicates the pursue of Mulan's true self. This emphasis of true self refers to Disney has tacitly accepted that the adaptation of *Mulan* Ballad must be added the searching for the true self to be valuable. Yin states that the process of universalizing other ethnic cultures means "an exclusion mechanism that perpetuates the existing hierarchy of discourse and power structure" [1]. The reason is that universalization is the arbitrary assimilation of other ethnic cultures based on the dominant culture, and in this process, the dominated groups default that only themselves contain universality. So they can use their own standard to judge that other ethnic cultures are abnormal so as to maintain their normality [1]. In *Mulan*(1998), the core of Chinese cultural values and elements are displaced by the western idea of the heroism of individualism and feminism, and only some superficial elements are maintained such as Dragon, Great Wall, and Forbidden City in order to keep some exotic otherness. During this process the movie reinforces the white, middle-class, American ideology and at the same time emasculates Chinese traditional values [1].

On the other hand, Feng states that in order to depict Mulan's pursuit of her true self and awareness of feminism, "traditional Chinese culture was portrayed as an oriental despotism that was hostile to both individual freedom and feminism" [1]. This refers to only western civilization is progressive, democratic, civilized, and feminist in this context and "The Other" is backward and misogynist [10], meaning that oppression of people of color occurred as a result of an illiberal tradition or culture, such as women serving as tools for males rather than as sources of power and control. In the movie, individuals and families are completely opposite in Chinese cultures is accentuated by the lyrics of the song *Reflection*: "I will never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter...I'm not meant to play this part? Now I see That if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart". The irreconcilable relationship embodied in the lyrics is blaming China's family culture for being too rigid and feudal therefore causing the oppression of

Mulan. Additionally, another reason for Disney to attribute feminism to the cultural phenomenon is because Disney wants to present the sense of gender equality without making white male audiences feel being threatened through implies Western patriarchy, so it attributes women's oppression to China's unique cultural problems. The way of constantly emphasizing and shaping the pedantry of Chinese traditional culture can get rid of the relationship between Mulan's oppressive situation and Western patriarchy. In this way, Mulan is depicted as a victim of Chinese culture, and she needs to be rescued by the western ideology of individualism and feminism [1].

#### **4. SPEAKING FOR OTHERS & TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM**

The two Mulan films also have great inspirations for transnational feminism and the problem of speaking for others. Since Disney distorted the Chinese culture and feminism in Mulan Ballad and causing many dissatisfaction but this does not mean that the story of one culture can only be narrated by itself and other cultures have no right to narrate. Many people realize that speaking for others is dangerous due to speaker's speech cannot transcend the speaker's location so privileged locations might cause the reinforcement of the oppression. Because of privileged people are often treated as authorities so people will listen to them instead of the oppressor's voice. Therefore, some essentialists thought since truth is essence so truth should be independent of speakers' locations. That is not true because truth can be relevant to location, but it does not mean location can determine what the truth is. "Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static" [12]. It refers to people should not consider location as always being stationary but should think of it as containing mobility. There are also people who thought people should retreat into discrete locations and only speak for themselves but by doing that "it undercuts the possibility of political effectivity" [12]. Political effects can only be garnered by speaking for others. This autonomous conception of the self means one's own's speech can only represent himself and he should be completely independent without any impact by others. It is unrealistic because "speak for me" is a social practice. There is no such a neutral place for one's words not influenced by others at all or only represent oneself. It is true that making errors while different cultures trying to speak for others is unavoidable, but this is also the best way for people to correct each other so that can be able to gain a better understanding of each other. Only speaking for "myself" and refusing to speak for others is out of a desire for personal mastery. Since people are relational so no-one can have the absolute right of one's own interpretation. According to one of Lugones and Spelman's advice, the privileged group should abandon the idea of "out of duty" and instead practice genuine

friendship based on pure reciprocity [14]. It implies that privileged culture may speak for others, but privileged culture must be aware that they may make errors.

Similar to the problem of speaking for others, although feminism in two Mulan films falsely understand feminism in Mulan Ballad's context by applying universalism, this also does not mean feminists in privileged group cannot help less-privileged group. The practice of transnational feminism, it also often falls into the dilemma of relativism and universalism. It is saying that transnational feminism can either admit that there is a universal standard for all feminists which is universalism, and it will finally turn to be imperialism or if imperialism is abolished then it is inevitable to fall into relativism. Relativism implies absolutism which indicates that each society can only take care of itself and cannot interfere with people in other countries due to others are in a different situation so no-one can interfere with them. Both relativism and imperialism are not good for transnational feminism. Imperialism feminism which is also called missionary feminism who uses universalism as the key concept can leads to reinforcement of the oppression for women of colors due to they want to "save them" [13]. "Saving involves a sense of superiority by westerns and a lack of...who can make a change and about the form of life "other" cultures should ultimately be changed to" [13]. It indicates missionary feminism thinking in an ideological way and refuse to accept cultural differences. For example, missionary feminists view women in Afghanistan wear hijabs and burqas as being oppressed but the fact is Muslim women view the hijab as "takes the emphasis away from their exterior and focus it on their interior". However, universalism does not have to be tied to missionary feminism because "missionary feminism combines a strange species of universalism with particular ways of constructing non-normative facts, opposing missionary feminism means changing both the structure of existing universalist moral ideals and ideological ways of seeing" [13]. It is saying that universalism in missionary feminism is a strange version of universalism. This version of universalism contains ethnocentrism and monism. It refers to only one group of people imposes their own ethics on all the rest of the people. It falsely understands feminism because feminism should be a resistance to the oppression of the patriarchal society rather than to build an ideal society based on one's own ethics. Therefore, it is possible to maintain the universalism of against oppression but at the same time opposing universalism.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Through the comparison of the two Mulan films and Mulan Ballad, it can be found that in the process of transculturation, the original Confucianism in Mulan Ballad such as collective feminism and filial piety is buried, and it is replaced by the pursuit of true self and

consciousness of feminism in Western ideology. In order to better highlight feminism in the films without offending western male audiences, Disney depicts China in Mulan ballad as a society with Misogyny culture and autocratic feudalism. The two Mulan films did not take into account the Chinese political identity. However, this does not mean that a privileged culture cannot speak for a less-privileged culture, nor does it mean that each culture can only speak for itself. Since societies are relational, no culture can be completely independent from any other culture. The correct way for privileged culture to speak for others is to replace the savior's mentality with pure reciprocity. For Disney, it failed to do that because Disney's Mulan was portrayed as a woman who needed to be saved by western ideologies. It should further explore Chinese culture and abandon its universalism. The Disney version of Mulan is also a negative example of transnational feminism. As just said, transnational feminism should also give more consideration to the identity politics of colored women, rather than treat colored women in the way of a savior. The opposite of universalism is not necessarily relativism. It is possible to retain a kind of universalism that only emphasis on against oppression and cultural aggression while opposing imperialist universalism.

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