



# "We All Love the White Mermaid"

## Chinese Disney Fans Discuss Racism Issues

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**Abstract.** This study aims to delve into the Chinese Disney fan community's discussion of this racially relevant issue in the context of the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*, starring a black cast, a movie that not only touches on the issue of loyalty to the original, but also on broader racial, cultural, and social issues. By analyzing the responses of the Chinese Disney fan community and their texts on online social media platforms (mainly Douban), this paper hopes to provide insight into the diverse and complex evaluations of the film by the Chinese Disney fan community, as well as the social perceptions and contexts reflected in these evaluations.

**Keywords:** 'The Little Mermaid', racial issues, Disney, Chinese Disney fans

## 1 Introduction

As the process of globalization accelerates, international cultural exchanges are becoming more and more frequent, and this phenomenon has brought about many complex social and cultural issues, which include racial issues, which have always been a hot topic of concern in the social field. Against this backdrop, Disney recently adapted the animated classic *The Little Mermaid* into a live-action romantic fantasy song-and-dance movie, and chose black actress Halle Bailey to play the lead role of Ariel. The news has caused widespread discussion and controversy in both the West and China. In China, the movie has a rating of only 4.8 on Douban and 7 on IMDB, with 370,000 out of 1.12 million people giving it one star. These ratings reflect the complex attitudes and evaluations of the audience towards the movie, as well as touching on the topics of original loyalty, race, culture and society. Therefore, this study will delve into the evaluations and attitudes of the Chinese Disney fanbase toward this live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*, which deals with issues of race, as well as the social perceptions and contexts reflected in these evaluations.

Originally written by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen in 1837, *The Little Mermaid*, also known as *The Mermaid Princess*, is famous for its profound themes and rich, delicate and touching emotions. This story is about Ariel, the Little Mermaid, who is willing to give up her beautiful fish tail and wonderful singing voice for human legs

in her quest for love and growth in order to reach the high and immortal soul of a human being. Disney released the classic animated version of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, which marked the beginning of Disney's animation renaissance and became the pinnacle of animated films. Featuring advanced animation techniques and original music, this version won a warm welcome from audiences around the world. Recently, Disney's decision to produce a live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* has generated a lot of attention. The live-action version, directed by director Robin Arshat, chose black actress Halle Bailey to play the lead role of Ariel, a decision that sparked considerable controversy in the community. Production on the film is scheduled to start in 2021, with a projected release date of 2023. The movie is based on the 1989 animated movie version of the story of a little mermaid living in the ocean who, after falling in love with a human prince, resolves to give up her kingdom and race to become human and pursue love. This live-action movie will re-enact the original story in a real-world setting, giving viewers a new perspective and emotional experience.

## 2 It's a form of "forced political correctness."

Shortly after the trailer for the live-action *Little Mermaid* movie was released, the number of people who clicked on the video below already far exceeded the number of people who liked it by several times. The comments section of the video went down the drain, with so many negative comments, tweets, and even abuse that Disney had to hide the number of clicks, and some of the official distribution accounts shut down the comments in an attempt to create the illusion of a "happy" communication area.

After the release of Disney's live-action "*The Little Mermaid*" movie, "forced political correctness" was a frequent label on Sina Weibo, Douban and other Chinese Disney fan groups. These viewers argued that the casting of a black actor in the lead role was an attempt to appeal to current social and political agendas regarding racial and cultural diversity. Some scholars have pointed out that since the 1950s, "political correctness" has essentially become the dominant value in the United States,<sup>[1,2,3]</sup> not only calling for fuller and more complete equality, freedom, and pluralism, and paying more attention to minorities such as blacks and disadvantaged groups, but also due to its "progressive" and "just" nature. It has also become an important norm in the U.S. film, television, entertainment and media industries due to its "progressiveness" and "justice."<sup>[4]</sup> In the past Disney classic movies, the casting of actors and actresses are mostly white actors, in order to cater to globalization and develop a broader international market, Disney began to try to change in the animated films, shaping more images of princesses with skin colors other than white: Princess Jasmine in "*Aladdin*", the appearance of Chinese princesses in "*Mulan*", the appearance of the Princess and the Frog, such as the image of a black Tiana, but also the general public to more exotic cultures and diversification of the public. exposure to more exotic cultures and diversity.<sup>[4,5]</sup> As shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The images of Disney princesses over the years

| Princess Character | Appearance Time | Race/Country |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Snow White         | 1937            | White        |
| Cinderella         | 1950            | White        |
| Aurora             | 1959            | White        |
| Ariel              | 1989            | White        |
| Belle              | 1991            | White        |
| Jasmine            | 1992            | Sultan       |
| Pocahontas         | 1995            | Indian       |
| Mulan              | 1998            | China        |
| Tiana              | 2009            | Black        |

Following the release of *The Little Mermaid* in the Chinese movie market, many netizens felt that the casting of black actors was a deliberate attempt to force "political correctness". For many Chinese viewers, Disney's casting of a black actor in the title role of the *Little Mermaid* adaptation was interpreted as an act of pandering to Western political and social agendas. In recent years, as globalization progresses, Chinese society is becoming more diverse, however, compared to the West, where racial and gender diversity are seen as important social values, they are not given the same importance in China, and Chinese viewers see this move as lacking in artistic and storytelling needs, and more of an attempt to satisfy the West's political correctness. The introduction of political correctness and ideology into a film that is primarily entertainment has been controversial, with Chinese audiences arguing about the move that "the beauty of the name is that it is a voice for the underprivileged, but the villain chooses a beautiful white woman, and the contrast is more like vilifying black women and teasing the audience." Emphasizing these factors undermines the art and storytelling and can lead to thin and stereotypical characters and plots.

### 3 Unattractive Actors" - Stereotypes in a Multicultural World

Among the comments made by Chinese audiences about *The Little Mermaid*, "ugly casting" was another hot topic. This controversy reflects a white-centered aesthetic. "Aesthetics is a complex concept that is influenced by multiple factors such as socio-cultural, historical, educational and personal experiences. Disney films have largely shaped the audience's expectations of fairy tales and protagonists, and these expectations are largely based on whiteness. Therefore, when a black actor was chosen to play the lead role in the live-action movie, it shattered expectations for a portion of the audience. Historically, white people have long dominated society, and white culture, values and aesthetics have been widely spread and accepted globally. As a result, Chinese audiences' perception and understanding of beauty are often influenced by this white-centered culture as well.

Western movies and popular culture have long had a fairly widespread influence around the world, including in China. However, in most cases, these cultural products are constructed through Western perspectives and values. Therefore, Chinese audi-

ences' comments that the casting of black actors and actresses is a "clown mermaid", a "casting failure", and that "the face value does not match"<sup>[6,7]</sup> are a reflection of the Western-dominated cultural productions that have been constructed through Western perspectives and values. The audience's comments on "ruined", "casting failure", and "face value not conforming"<sup>[6,7]</sup> are interpretations of these Western-dominated concepts of beauty as "universal" or "standardized" in cultural works. To a certain extent, the audience's comments about "ruining childhood" reflect the problem of stereotyping. In the original animated movie *The Little Mermaid*, the main character is a blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned mermaid, and this image has been deeply engraved into the audience's mind. Under the long-term construction of society and culture, people's definition of "beauty" is often the result of socialization. Due to historical, cultural and socio-economic factors, different social and cultural groups may have very different definitions of "beauty".

In addition, China's own media and popular culture reinforce specific notions and stereotypes of beauty. After the movie's release, Sina Weibo's trending topics such as "The Little Mermaid heroine and villainess face value comparison" and "There is a kind of beauty that doesn't care about the audience's death" were on the list of hot searches and sparked heated debates. As the main way for people to obtain information, the media, whether it is movies, TV dramas, advertisements, or music videos, present images and stories of people in various ways, influencing people's perceptions and understanding of various racial characteristics. For a long time, the image of white people has been dominant in most mainstream media, and many characters, stories and images are centered around white people, thus making the image of white people a "default" or "standard". For example, among Disney's classic characters, most of the princess characters are white, a choice that inadvertently reinforces a white-centered aesthetic, and for many Chinese viewers, whose aesthetics have already been shaped by such social interactions, they expect that the protagonist of the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* will be white. Chinese audiences' acceptance of white mermaids is both an effect of the current social environment and a result of a long-term historical process. From a sociological point of view, the Chinese audience's controversy over the choice of a black actor for the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* is due to the fact that such a choice breaks their aesthetic expectations, challenges existing social structures and power relations, and at the same time, challenges long-term historical practices. The media plays an important role in shaping and reinforcing racial perceptions and aesthetic standards. It can either reinforce traditional, white-centered aesthetics or, by introducing elements of diversity and inclusiveness, promote changes in viewers' understanding and acceptance of race and aesthetics.

#### **4 Redefining the Little Mermaid: an exploration of characterization and diversity**

In the live-action *The Little Mermaid* movie, there are other viewers who believe that this adapted story presents itself differently from the original and animated versions in that it is more rebellious and portrays the character of the Little Mermaid as smarter,

braver, more persistent, and with a mind of her own. These viewers felt that this view highlighted the characterization and diversity of the characters in the movie and how the themes and characters were deepened in the movie.

These viewers believe that the live-action version of Ariel the Little Mermaid has a more independent and resilient character. Instead of passively choosing to sacrifice herself for the sake of love, she dares to take risks and pay the price for her own growth. This character transformation emphasizes women's autonomy in the story and reflects the brand new qualities of women's roles in modern society. It also echoes the feminist theory of autonomy and power view that women should have the power to make their own lives and decisions.<sup>[9]</sup> This perspective also reveals a discussion of the plurality and depth of roles. Ariel, the Little Mermaid, is no longer just a traditional fairy tale character; she has the right to her own desires, independent thinking, and autonomous decisions. This multi-dimensional character creation helps the audience to better understand and empathize with the character, rather than just seeing skin color and physical appearance. It reminds us of the power that can be expressed through movies, which can profoundly affect an audience's perception of gender, race, and diversity. While viewers sometimes only see the outward features of characters, movies also have the power to change viewers' perceptions through the actions and personalities of characters, encouraging deeper thinking and respect for diverse cultures. This further emphasizes the social responsibility of film as a cultural medium and how it can contribute to social change through characterization.

Characterization and diversity in the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* presents a new perspective that highlights the autonomy and independence of the protagonist Ariel, deepening the connotation of the character as well as exploring important social issues such as gender, race and diversity through the character. This innovative perspective allows the audience to understand the story and characters more fully, providing a powerful example of the film's far-reaching social impact.

## 5 Conclusion

Disney, as a global entertainment company, needs to consider how its products are accepted by different cultures and societies around the world. From this perspective, increasing diversity may be a business strategy. Some scholars have also pointed out that "it is the use of developed media to promote and guide public opinion in order to gain more economic benefits."<sup>[8]</sup> However, from the perspective of "enforced political correctness", Disney has been able to increase its diversity. <sup>[8]</sup> However, from the perspective of "enforced political correctness," this approach may be seen as a commercial compromise that does not show enough respect for the audience and the original work. "It's not that forcing a non-black character to be black is the right thing to do, a truly sincere work should be to create those stories that really belong to black people," a comment from a Chinese audience that argues that simply changing a character's race is not enough to address issues of diversity and inclusiveness, and may instead appear more superficial. The comment "wantonly reaping the economic benefits of political correctness" questions the economic motives of the filmmakers, who believe that the

casting of black actors and actresses in movies that cater to political correctness is a way to gain more profits<sup>[8]</sup> rather than a genuine sense of social responsibility, which is gradually being replaced by a sense of social responsibility in the context of the hot social issues of diversity and inclusiveness. Issues, gradually being transformed into cultural capital and further used for economic gain, even in the pursuit of diversity, the dominant force in filmmaking is still motivated by self-interest rather than a genuine concern for representation and diversity, reducing black ethnicity to a symbol or a marketing ploy. Whether movies, as works of literature and art, should take on social responsibility or exist only as entertainment products is also a widely discussed issue. For audiences who believe that movies should take on more social responsibility, it is not enough to achieve cultural diversity through superficial racial turnover.

It takes time for racial and aesthetic perceptions to change. We need to reflect on and broaden our aesthetics to accept and appreciate beauty in all its diversity. And it also requires that we need to understand that these aesthetics and notions of race are socially constructed, not inherent or natural. At the same time, we need to resist racism and respect and appreciate people of all races, rather than judging and expecting things from them based solely on their race. Even if there is no direct connection between China and the original cultural context of *The Little Mermaid*, globalization and cultural diversity have made this type of work, and the topics such as racial representation that are addressed in it, socially and culturally relevant on a broad global scale. It also provides opportunities for a deeper understanding of how cultural exchanges can be more effective in the context of the intertwining of global and regional cultures.

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