

A Survey on the Misinterpretation of Traditional Chinese Culture in Western Films: A Case Study of Disney Animation and Live-action Mulan

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Abstract

In the global community, the competition between countries is not only laid on economic strength, but also soft power, such as cultural communications. This article takes Disney's animated movie in 1998 and live-action movie in 2020 as the research object of study to explore the misperceptions and misunderstandings on traditional Chinese culture in Western films and television works and to analyze the dilemmas faced by traditional Chinese stories in cross-cultural contexts of communication, with a view to dissolving cultural conflicts and promoting cultural integration.

Keywords

Traditional Chinese Culture; Misinterpretation; Film; Mulan.

1. Introduction

Chinese traditional culture is founded on three ideological schools: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In Confucianism, "benevolence" is regarded as the kernel concept, in which "filial duty" is the foundation pointed out by Master Confucius. Many Buddhist classics also discuss the importance of "filial duty", as in *The Sutra of 42 Chapters*: "It is better for people to honor their parents, which is the most efficacious thing, than to worship the gods and ghosts of heaven and earth." Although Taoism emphasizes personal practice, it still believes that "filial duty" is the essence of all moral norms. The early Taoist classic *Tai Ping Jing* preaches: "Filial piety is the first thing in the world." Since ancient times, many classic literary works records real stories or complied folk stories with the theme of eulogizing "filial duty", among which one enjoys great popularity home and abroad: *Mulan Poem*. Such a story naturally offers a potential successful box office for Chinese and foreign film producers to create a lively Mulan on the screen. However, when viewing Disney's animated movie *Mulan* in 1998 and live-action movie in 2020, some obvious deviations from the original work and Chinese traditional culture could be easily noticed, thus worthy researching on.

2. Chinese Classic Mulan Story

Mulan story first appeared in a narrative poem called *Mulan Poem* in the Southern and Northern Dynasties. At that time, there were frequent wars. When the country suffered from Rouran Khaganate's attack on a large scale, the emperor issued an imperial edict over the country. Without exception, Mulan's father's name is among one of them. However, apart from the elderly parents, there were only her sister and younger brother left at home, so Mulan decided to dress up as a man to go to war field instead of her father. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, in addition to constant wars and severe feudal separatist regimes, there were cultural shocks between the newly rising of Buddhism and Taoism and the long-impacting Confucian culture. People's ideologies had been gradually enlightened and innovated, and their benevolence for women had been gradually improved. People began to eulogize female good

virtues. However, the status of “Orthodoxy of Confucianism” had not changed since it was shaken. Therefore, although *Mulan Poem* eulogized the new trend of thought that women should be brave to break through the fetters and handcuffs of feudal etiquette. The whole poem was based on the “filial duty” of Confucianism which paid great attention to loyalty and filial piety, and highly praised Mulan's “filial duty” to her family, loyalty to her country and her own courage and tenacity.

3. Misinterpretations of Chinese Traditional Culture in Two Movies

Disney has a renowned reputation on creating animated stories in which multicultural images are shown, including race, gender, ethnicity, and consumerism [1]. Since animated movie *Mulan* released in the United States on June 19th, 1998, its box office reached \$23 million in three days, and then it made more than 300 million US dollars in the global box office. In 2020, Disney's remake of the live action film *Mulan* was released. According to media statistics, the score of rotten tomatoes in Europe and the United States after its release was 73%, and it didn't take long before the score soared to 80%. *Mulan* broke \$400 million global box office, of which mainland China contributed the most, but its Douban score was only 4.8 points, even failing to meet the passing standard. By carefully comparing and researching two *Mulan* films created by Disney, it's not hard to find that there are a lot of misinterpretations and malicious portrayals of Chinese traditional culture.

3.1. Chaotic Splicing of Cultural Elements in Movies

The creation process of films is actually a process in which film directors, screenwriters, select the key elements and reshape them in a specific cultural environment and background [2]. Disney claimed that in two *Mulan* films, Chinese traditional cultural elements and images were restored and properly displayed as much as possible so as to reach cultural appropriation which refers to “the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” [3]. In fact, the study of Chinese traditional culture and history was unilateral and inconsistent with history in two films. According to *Mulan Poem*, it shows that Mulan should have lived in the Yellow River valley at that time and belonged to the northern minority. In the 1998 animated *Mulan* movie, Mulan's family had a courtyard which was beautiful and elegant south of the Yangtze River garden style, and even there appeared a typical garden building--moon gate. In the 2020 live-action *Mulan* movie, Mulan actually lived in Fujian Tulou, a unique building in southwest Fujian. The orange lanterns hung and lit in many places in the room, and the extensive use of highly saturated warm color decorations were used, which made the whole interior style quirky. Admittedly, these two types of buildings represented unique Chinese architectural features, but they were seriously inconsistent with the original works. Although it is believed that some films rooted in specific cultures can be difficult to be accepted by audiences with different beliefs, concepts and historical cultures in other regions [4]. The film creators lacked deeper investigation and research on Chinese traditional culture, arbitrarily piece together the more famous elements of Chinese traditional culture, and attracted people's attention with abrupt aesthetics.

3.2. Stereotypes and Defamation of Chinese Female Images

For many years, foreigners have had stereotypes about Chinese women: single eyelids, squinting eyes, protruding cheekbones, collapsed nose, thick lips and dark skin. In animated movie, Mulan appeared with a long shawl, phoenix eyes and thick lips, which was an obvious image of Chinese women in the eyes of the West. Mulan in the live-action movie is more coincident to the public aesthetic. However, in both films, exaggerated makeup uglified the image of Chinese women. On a blind date, Mulan's “forehead yellow makeup” was displayed in a literal way. In fact, “Hua Huang” was a kind of decoration in the face for ancient women. It was

painted with yellow powder or cut golden paper into stars, moons, flowers and birds and pasted on the forehead, or directly painted with yellow on the forehead. However, the exaggerated makeup which used highly saturated yellow-red color scheme made the Chinese audience unable to bear to look directly at it. On her blind date, Mulan wore purple dress which symbolized dignity was not in line with history. *Book of Jin* said: "Common people can't wear purple clothes." There was a strict policy of status in ancient times, and there were harsh rules about who could wear what kind of clothes in Wei and Jin Dynasties. Disney claimed that they displayed more diverse ancient Chinese costumes, but in fact it was random and confusing traditional Chinese costumes. Even on the Internet, many foreign friends actively imitated the "Chinese traditional makeup" from the film. This deliberately defaced culture was named as Chinese traditional culture. This was a kind of reverse cultural propaganda, which deepened foreigners' misinterpretations of Chinese traditional culture.

3.3. Malicious Depiction of Chinese Traditional Cultural Elements

Dragon is the supreme symbol in Chinese traditional culture, and it's generally recognized that Oriental Dragon represents China in the international world. But in the animated *Mulan* movie, the dragon was deliberately dwarfed into a lizard. The dwarfish and clumsy lizard made funny antics to make people laugh, and the dragon's divine image collapsed. By deliberately degrading China's image, it reflected the western powers' self-righteous superiority and disrespect for other countries.

3.4. Deviation from the Original Historical Facts

In both films, Mulan could optionally enter and leave the ancestral temple, which was obviously contrary to the ancient system of respect and inferiority. In the feudal dynasty, men were superior to women, the patriarchal clan system of ancestral temples was strict, and women were not allowed to enter. Besides, there were many goofing-off scenes in the animated movie, such as the soundtrack of writing letters was the sound of typewriters, Mulan's female identity was discovered without punishing, and so on. The producers didn't strictly examine the historical background, and optionally adapted the original plot in order to mold Mulan's feminism and personal heroism.

3.5. Key Concepts Stealing and American Core Values Promotion

The live-action movie is blatant in promoting western feminism and individualism which have made Mulan a superhero in Hollywood context [5], to the scope of audience acceptance and preference [6]. Mulan was born with divine power called "chi". *The Book of Burial* says: "Chi, which evolves six times Yin and Yang images in the sky void and becomes everything in the world". Besides, Chinese medicine also has explanations for "Chi". However, Disney producers didn't base on China's local cultural roots, and even defined it as a western unnatural element. There was another woman had "Chi" who was an evil villain witch called *Xianniang*. But witches have the function of blessing and praying in Chinese traditional culture, so our ancients were in awe of witches. In the film, she worked with Khan in order to gain recognition and respect, but when she found that Mulan can win recognition for their status, she chose to help Mulan. So, the witch's role was only to serve Mulan to realize her personal value and. Mulan's spirit of loyalty to the country had been deliberately weakened, and this film focused on the process of her self-worth being realized and sublimated. Such a growth model that paid attention to individual values coincided with the heroism advocated by the West. Producers were only willing to use their own subjective consciousness to distort and vilify Chinese culture, and the stiffly imposed western witch elements made the film even more nondescript. Oriental skin, western bone. Only superficial films were not supported by Chinese traditional culture, it's hard to get the cultural recognition of Chinese fans.

4. An Analysis of the Reasons of Misinterpretations

4.1. Unintentional Misunderstanding Due to Cultural Differences

Chinese culture is broad and profound, and ancient culture is even more abstruse. Scholars generally believe that effectively promoting the cultural exchanges and mutual learning between China and the West requires putting down prejudice and good text translation. Such as the famous sentence in *Mulan Poem*: "When side by side two rabbits go, who can tell the buck from the doe?" In the film, it was actually translated as "Black wind and I rode along-side two rabbits running side by side, I think one was a male one was a female". The differences between Chinese and western characters, expressions and sentence structures make it difficult to translate between Chinese and English, so that the translation of sentences loses the wonderful use of finishing touch of the original sentence and the lingering charm of classical poem.

4.2. Intentional Misperception under the Theory of "China Threat"

As China's economy grows steadily and its comprehensive national strength improves, the status of the US as a superpower has been shaken. Especially, the attitude of western capitalist powers headed by the US towards China's development of its own economy and culture is becoming more and more negative. Not only do they crowd out China in the world political arena, but they create troubles that hinder China's economic development. The western media wantonly discredited China, deliberately vilified China's present situation, magnified its shortcomings and deficiencies, and even fabricated many ugly images that didn't belong to China, which left many westerners with a very bad impression on China. The western model uses power and status to describe other cultures and races, forming the image of "the other". Accordingly, it creates lies and prejudices on China-related issues, thus damaging China's international image and isolating China.

5. Conclusion

Disney's *Mulan* movies are an example of western capitalism repackaging American values by borrowing Chinese elements. Cultural misinterpretations could be seen everywhere in movies, which is essentially in the name of telling Chinese stories, but actually takes the opportunity to somewhat distort Chinese traditional culture. In addition, there are many Hollywood films, such as *Shang-Chi* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, which is similar to this case. The misinterpretations of Chinese traditional culture by these films and television works, whether unintentional or intentional, are smears of Chinese traditional culture. Even western capitalism not only implements the policy of cultural aggression in films and televisions, but also in education, religion and so on. Cultural aggression has never stopped, and everyone should look before you leap.

Chinese government should take an active attitude, vigorously publicize traditional culture on the international stage through integrated media, make it known to international friends, so as to reduce culture misinterpretations. This has also sounded the alarm for the domestic film and television industries. In order to avoid cultural aggression, foreign media products should be properly selected. Furthermore, every moviegoer should be alert, and learn to criticize and resist the cultural aggression in western films and televisions. Every Chinese citizen, not only the audience, should attach great importance to inheriting and carrying forward Chinese excellent traditional culture, actively publicize Chinese traditional culture, make Chinese traditional culture step onto the international stage and show its unique charm.

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