A Study of Cultural Differences between China and the United States: Taking the American Film *Mulan* and the Chinese Film *Mulan* as Examples

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**Abstract:** MULAN is a live-action feature film produced by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures 2020. Compared with the Chinese film *Mulan*, the film has been adapted to retain Chinese elements while also permeating a lot of Western cultural values. This paper attempts to analyze the cultural differences and dislocation reflected in the two films, aiming at stimulating the cultural sensitivity of the public when watching the films, enhancing the public’s perception of different cultures, so as to ensure the effective conduct of cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Hua Mulan; Cultural differences; Hofstede; Feminism

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The *Ballad of Mulan*, the folk song of the era of Northern Wei of China (around 400 AD), with its legendary color tells the story of a girl named Mulan who disguised herself as a man and joined the army in place of her father. She made many military achievements on the battlefield, but she did not want to be an official and only wanted to return home to fulfill her filial duty. The reason why the *Ballad of Mulan* has been passed from generation to generation is closely related to the heroine image it created. This classic story has been adapted into various forms of drama for many times. As a distinctive “symbol” of Chinese traditional culture, it is very popular among foreign filmmakers. After adapting MULAN as an animated film in 1998, Disney made another live-action feature film of MULAN in 2020. Compared with *Mulan* directed by Jingle Ma, a Hong Kong director of China, the Disney MULAN has restored some Chinese elements such as “Two rabbits walking side by side, how can you distinguish me as male and female”. However, due to the deep-rooted western culture, the film seems to be telling the “Chinese story” in “western language”.
1. The Value Dimension of Geert Hofstede and “Hua Mulan”

Geert Hofstede divides cultural differences into five value dimensions in his research and analysis of cultural values in more than 50 countries and regions: Individualism and Collectivism; Power distance; Masculinity and Femininity; Uncertainty Avoidance; Long-term orientation and Short-term orientation; Indulgence and Restraint to reflect the behavioral and cognitive differences of different cultures.

(I) American Heroism “MULAN” and Chinese Patriotism “Mulan”

In his book Cultures and Organizations: Software of Mind, Geert Hofstede believes that “individualism” refers to a loosely integrated social organization structure in which each person attaches importance to his own value and the needs of his family, and defines his identity by “I”. “Collectivism”, by contrast, is a cohesive social organization in which people identify with an internal group that has a responsibility to take care of them, while committing absolute loyalty to that group and defining their identity as “we”.

The United States advocates “individualism” and emphasizes all means that are conducive to individual action. When watching MULAN, we find that Mulan’s image is closer to that of western heroes with superpowers. For example, Mulan was born with a different “quality” from ordinary people, which also foreshadowed her future as a “heroine”. In the face of the invasion of the Rouran army, she saved the whole army only on her own. At the end of the film, Mulan saved the emperor all by herself, displaying the extraordinary wisdom of a typical “American hero”. China, on the other hand, advocates “collectivism” and emphasizes that the interests of the collective outweigh those of the individual. In the film Mulan, we can see many times such words of the sense of belonging as “we” and “brother”. For example, when Mulan asked the whole army to retreat after they were seriously damaged, Xiaohu’s words “Brothers, we will do our last bit to help our general to retreat” were heard by all. When Xiaohu got captured, Wugui hoped Mulan could save Xiaohu, but Mulan said bitterly: “You are all my brothers.” And when Mulan was trapped in the valley, she said to all the soldiers from the bottom of her heart: “the general can abandon me, the country can abandon me, but I, Hua Mulan, will never betray my country.” All of this can fully reflect the collectivism and the strong sense of national honor in the traditional Chinese culture.

In addition, Mulan’s view of love also has a big difference in these two films. Chinese Mulan and Wen Tai were immersed in the love beyond life early in the endless war, but as the prince and general, Wen Tai will take the initiative to give up love
for the sake of national righteousness. This is very consistent with the national interests under the values of eastern culture. In contrast, the setting of “Hong Hui” as a common warrior in the film MULAN ensures that even if Mulan and he fall in love, they will not be forced to separate because of the national interest. However, by the end of the film, the relationship between Mulan and Hong Hui is only “more than friends, less than lovers”. The film is more concerned with interpreting the recognition of Mulan’s identity, which is in line with the individual liberalism advocated in Western culture.

(2) The Power Gap between Chinese and American Cultures

Geert Hofstede believes that inequality exists in any society, and the degree to which the public can accept the unequal status of power in this society is the power distance. According to Geert Hofstede’s research, western countries are mostly low-power distance countries, while eastern countries are mostly high-power distance countries.

What is worth mentioning here is the interpretation of “filial piety” in the two films. China has been advocating Confucianism since ancient times, and has a strict hierarchical relationship. There is a saying that “Filial piety comes first”, and filial piety is always the most important part of traditional Chinese morality. The only reason Chinese Mulan declined the emperor’s return was because she had “fought for 12 years and never fulfilled her filial duty”. While the American film interpreted the “filial piety” as “Devotion to family”, which precisely reflects that in American families, parents cannot impose their will on their children. Children enjoy equal rights with their parents and have independent consciousness. They do what they think is right and are responsible for themselves and their families. In addition, in traditional Chinese culture, elders and people of status are respected. Therefore, when Chinese Mulan triumphantly returns home, the emperor, as the highest monarch, “entitle” (Hua Mulan as the general of Wei) and “absolve” (your sins) to reward Mulan. In contrast, the emperor of the American version does not look like a king. There are plots like that the emperor went to the battle, and Mulan came to the rescue and was praised and encouraged by the emperor. After the victory, the emperor gave Mulan a new and special sword as a “gift” and told the country that “people owe you a thank you, I owe you my life.” It seems that the relationship between Mulan and the emperor is less hierarchical but of more mutual support and gratitude between friends.
(3) Masculinization of the Society and Feminization of the Society

According to Geert Hofstede’s theory, masculinity and femininity refer to the different understandings of gender by members of different cultures. In a male-dominated society, where male members are dominant, aggressive and comfortable with money demands, women should be gentle and humble; while in a female-dominated society, both men and women are expected to be gentle and humble, and to value quality of life. It should be noted that this theory is not the so-called “the male preference”, but a more accurate concept of the relationship between “focus on quantity” and “focus on quality”.

The interpretation of the relationship between Rouran and the Northern Wei in the two films can be precisely explained in this concept. The United States is a country with a strong male culture, emphasizing competition and initiative. “Rouran” portrayed in the film MULAN never wanted to reconcile with the Northern Wei, and in addition to coveting Wei’s wealth, it also wanted the imperial power, which reflects their strong desire for money and power. Chinese culture is between male culture society and female culture society, emphasizing the integration with the nature and paying attention to moral ethics. Therefore, in the film Mulan the old chief of Rouran is glad to make peace with the Northern Wei by his daughter’s marriage. Although the old chief was assassinated by his son and the war could not be avoided, the final direction of the film is to reach a consensus on the harmony between the two sides based on the guidance of such cultural values, which reflects the idea of “harmony is the most precious” in Chinese culture.

2. Role Building from the Perspective of Feminism

The image of Mulan, as a model of feminism, not only breaks the traditional definition of gender roles with Mulan “dressing as a man”, but also objectively reflects the awakening awareness of anti-discrimination like “who says women are inferior to men”. That’s why this is the only Chinese story selected by Disney to be adapted twice, from animation to live action. However, due to the differences in cultural values between the two films, the images in the same story also show completely different appearance.

Since ancient times, China has been basically a male-dominated society. Even after the reform, the awakening of women’s consciousness of independence has improved the status of women, but the positioning of women’s “family role” in traditional culture has not completely liberated women. Not to mention in ancient times of honoring the teacher and respecting his teaching, women could not be compared with men in terms of politics, culture, cognition and concept. Even in the private
environment like family, the status of women is always lower than that of men. For example, words like “A woman without talent is virtue”, “assist the husband and bring up the child”, “good wife and loving mother” are the best praise to women’s moral character in ancient times. However, the United States, influenced by the western feminist movement around the 20th century, established the affirmation of the independence of women in its cultural values.

**1) Mulan’s Role**
Mulan of the Chinese version is a model and legend in the history of Chinese female culture. She possesses all the images of women in traditional Chinese culture. Mulan is virtuous and filial before joining the army in place of her father, shy and embarrassed when first joining the army, resolute and clever in the war, indecisive when falling love with the prince, and self-restrained to give up love for the sake of the country. The American version of Mulan, on the other hand, radiates a strong sense of feminism—freedom, equality and independence. She was an innocent maiden before she went to war, an independent woman daring to speak out in the army, and even though she is a woman, she is more brave than other men and has the courage to assert themselves on the battlefield. At the same time, Mulan is not subject to the fetters of love. She insists on her ideals and aspirations. Her thoughts and behaviors are no inferior in today’s society. Niki Caro, the director of MULAN, expressed her opinion before making the film that the essence of the story is about a young woman understanding, appreciating and ultimately respecting her own strength. So, the film looks more like explaining the values of western women by a “Chinese story”. In addition to Mulan, there are two female characters worth mentioning in the film: Mulan’s sister and the witch. They represent two extremes: the younger generation that accepts blind dates and accepts everything for what they are; the other is an elder generation that wants to justify herself but attaches herself to male hegemony, and eventually realized her errors and mended her ways. Mulan, however, exists as a young woman with a sense of independence who breaks these two extremes.

The revelation of Mulan’s identity is also very different between the two films. Chinese Mulan has been hiding her identity. Her fellow Xiaohu not only kept secret the for her, but also taught her “how to laugh like a man”. She doesn’t reveal her true identity until the end of the war. While the American versions different. With the help of the witch’s “power”, she confesses to “putting right the wrongs” instead of hiding.

**2) The Creation of Male Images**
In the Chinese film Mulan, all the roles are played by men except for Mulan and Princess Rouran. In men’s eyes, women always exist as the “others” besides men,
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which can be inferred from in Mulan’s father’s opening line that “why bother to teach her Kungfu? She’s a girl after all. Who will marry her after seeing her playing with spears and cudgels all day long?” While the male images in the American version are the reconstructed relationship between the sexes under the feminist structure, which gradually changes from the unequal relationship between strong and weak, high and low to the diversified and interdependent relationship. For example, Mulan’s father asked her to hide her “quality” at the beginning, but after Mulan returning home with honor, he apologized: “My daughter is everything to me. I owe you an apology.” And General Dong evicted Mulan from the army at first, and in the end, he accepted Mulan’s suggestions and restored her status as a soldier. Besides, the image of the woman and the man sitting at the same time on the court at the end of the film would never be seen in Chinese history.

3. Conclusion

From the perspective of contextual cultural differences, China belongs to the high-context culture, while the United States belongs to the low-context culture. You can’t say which culture is better, so there is no good or bad between the two films, and there is no need to determine which film is more popular. It is the matter that we should correctly recognize that the misunderstanding and dislocation of cultural differences will inevitably occur in the process of the collision of eastern classics with western mainstream values.

So, how can this misunderstanding and misalignment be minimized? In the author’s opinion, we should first make it clear that simple element stacking is not cultural fusion. Only by understanding each other’s history and culture first and making each other feel that you are not opposed can cultures better blend into each other. Of course, this does not mean that we should abandon our culture and “worship foreign things”, but that with the help of the other’s cultural values, we can find out which part of our culture has the greatest influence on us, and then share our culture in a way that is suitable for their cultural habits. As for to what extent the other side can accept, that’s not our concern, because good culture will naturally be “seeded”, and different cultures will be gathered, given new life, and then they will take root and sprout, and bear the most beautiful cultural fruits.
Works Cited


