Culture Differences Based on a Case Study of Different Versions of *Mulan*

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Abstract

With the spread of the long narrative poem *The Balled of Mulan*, the story of Mulan has been brought to the screen and remade into various versions. This paper, based on comprehensive analysis of different assessments from viewers of two films about Mulan, aims to compare the differences between Chinese and Western cultures as reflected in two versions of *Mulan* from different perspectives, and to analyze the reasons for the differences and gain some insights from them.

Keywords: culture differences, culture communication, *The Balled of Mulan*, film and television

Introduction

Hua Mulan, the heroine of ancient China, whose story is based on the long narrative poem *The Balled of Mulan* of the Northern Dynasty of China. The poem tells the story of a girl named Mulan, who disguised herself as a man and fought for her father against foreign invasion, celebrating Mulan's courageous spirit and filial qualities. The story of Mulan is widely spread and has become a much-told tale. In recent years, it has also been brought to the screen and remade into different versions. The most representative ones may be the ancient costume film *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* made by a Chinese director in 2009 and the live-action drama movie *Mulan* released by the U.S. Disney Company in 2020. Taking these two movies as examples, the article aims to compare the differences between Chinese and Western cultures as reflected in these two films from different perspectives, and to analyze the reasons for the differences and gain some profound insights from them.

The 2009 version of Mulan: *Rise of a Warrior*, directed by Chucheng Ma and starring Wei Zhao, tells the story of Mulan, a Northern Wei woman who took her infirm father’s place in the emperor’s army and led the army to fight against the invading Northern Wei tribes. The film utilized a realistic style to restore the cruel and tragic ancient wars, including the army battle formation. All these elements contribute to reflecting Chinese characteristics and carrying forward Chinese culture by giving truth to the legend and lament to the epic.
Although the 2009 version of Mulan is always criticized for the excessive emotional scenes and tragic ending of the heroine. Actually, all plots serve to shape the character of Mulan. In other words, experience and sacrifice pave the way for growth of Mulan. She put filial piety at the first place, and fought in her father’s stead. During the ten years of the war, Mulan disguised as a man and became increasingly bold and strong. Especially when Mulan faced the death of her best friend that was humiliated and killed by the enemy, she was still able to calmly analyze the situation and hold back for the sake of justice. In the end, she refused rewards to return home and gave up her love with the prince, for the marriage between the Northern Wei Dynasty and tribes in exchange for peace. What Mulan did not only reflected the traditional Chinese culture of filial piety, loyalty and patriotism, but also realized her self-value and highlighted the awakening of female consciousness which made much of the story’s gender-bending subtexts.

Compared to the former version, the live-action, unmusical version of Mulan in 2020 has excellent production team and large investment. Besides, Disney filmed 80 stunt riders in Kazakhstan and Mongolia galloping on the battlefield scene, and strived to recreate the special makeup in ancient time. However, the result is not satisfactory. For foreign audiences, the film is unfaithful to the Mulan legend—or at least to Disney’s own version of it for lack of big musical numbers and soaring ballads, which is not acceptable to hard-core fans of the 1998 Disney original groused. For Chinese audiences, Mulan is a superhero rather than a traditional Chinese heroine in this version.

This kind of individual heroism that various situations need to be changed by the protagonist can be accepted by Chinese audiences in American films as the expression of American culture. But once it was put into a Chinese context, Chinese audiences could feel nothing but incongruity. Furthermore, the major reason why Chinese people did not think highly of the movie was the film’s superficialization of the traditional Chinese spirit. The film attributed the warriors’ spirit of loyalty and patriotism to a kind of “qi” which ignored the spiritual core that the original poem intended to convey, making the ideology and spirit too superficial. In addition, the witch in the movie which was a representative of Western culture aggravated the sense of conflict between different cultures, wrecking the enjoyable experience of watching the film.

The two versions of Mulan come from the same root, but have received different assessments in the Chinese film market. Combining the above comparison of the differences between the two versions of the film, the authors have made a further analysis of the reasons for the differences.

Religious differences: Confucianism and Christianity

Traditional Confucianism in China stresses the great importance of loyalty, filial piety and benevolence, especially filial piety, which is respected as the most important section of all virtues【1】. From the beginning of the film, Mulan shipped off to war instead of her sick father, to the end of the film, Mulan gave up her love to protect the stability of the country. The central themes of loyalty and filial piety run through the film.

In the West, Christianity is considered as the mainstream social thought. For instance, the
Bible inspires Christian with the idea that everyone is equal before God who created the world, so everyone has the right to realize his or her own value【2】. From the behaviors of the heroine in the 2020 version of Mulan, including fighting with boys in her childhood and experiencing a terrible blind date, the action of Mulan was more like a rebellion against traditional ideas, rather than out of filial piety. The lines of Mulan, such as “Maybe I didn’t go for my father, maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right”, also proved the point. In the movie, she armed herself as a warrior with armor and realized her value, proving that women can take social responsibilities and have the same social status as male【3】【4】.

2. Differences in thinking modes: abstract thinking and concrete thinking

Affected by cultural background, ethnic groups root in various cultures will generate different thinking patterns. The Chinese mode of thinking focuses on induction and seeking common ground, while the Western mode of thinking focuses on logical demonstration. Chinese people are accustomed to seeking unified dialectical thinking in contradictions, and Western citizens are better at logical reasoning and rational thinking【5】.

Judging from the artistic styles of the two films Mulan in the 2009 and 2020 versions, apart from the differences in age and shooting techniques, different ways of thinking should be the main reason for the differences. The overall style and setting of the background of the 2009 version of Mulan does not have intensely detailed descriptions, but focuses on portraying the background and atmosphere of the era. For example, in the Ballad of Mulan, the descriptions such as "Mulan wove at door", "At dusk by River Yellow, at dusk by Mountain Dark", "Once again I comb my hair with patterns on my face " are not all realistic, and the 2009 version provides a lot of space for the viewers. However, in the 2020 version of Mulan, the audiences can see the director's efforts to restore the details of The Ballad of Mulan, such as weaving at door, making up and the journey to the army. Nevertheless, there is still severe historical misunderstanding such as "Mulan wears a dress made in the Tang Dynasty and lives in a Tulou (Chinese traditional communal residence, usually of circular shape) in Fujian province【6】". The application of concrete thinking in the film remains to be further discussed.

3. The difference of heroism: collective heroism and individual heroism

Mulan is a typical romantic hero. Whether in Chinese stories or in Western films, she is brave and intelligent, and a heroine who does not lose out on men.

Against the background of China's collectivism, Mulan enlisted in the military, fought side by side with other warriors in the army, and gradually demonstrated her military talent. In the 2009 version of Mulan, she was an ordinary person with martial arts, who was slightly better than ordinary people. Her talents and wisdom were displayed in collective life. She could indeed fight but was not omnipotent. In this way, the image of flesh and blood characters is more likely to be accepted by Chinese audiences and supported as heroes, which is in line with the image of qualified leaders in the hearts of Chinese people【7】.

The 2020 version of Mulan was born of Western individual heroism. Among them, Mulan
naturally had some special abilities of Western superheroes —— omnipotent and winning every battle. Western movies are full of lonely heroes that save the world by one person. Disney has added the customary setting of princess. Therefore, Mulan in the 2020 version was born with the mission of making a great breakthrough. She could defeat witches and be the head of the enemy general easily. This kind of Mulan makes an impression on the viewers probably, but it is a pity that she is no longer the girl in the Chinese mind that can still be a normal girl without her uniform and weapons. She has been too far away from the lives of ordinary Chinese under the shaping of Western individual heroism.

To sum up, although both versions of Mulan are adapted from the same story, they have received extremely different assessments in the Chinese market. The 2020 version of Mulan is more like an American story combined with Chinese elements, which shows that different versions localize the same character, and the reason is still the cultural difference. Film is a major medium for cultural transmission, and the portrayal of characters in film reflects the different values of different countries. In the context of globalization, exchanges between countries are becoming more frequent, advocating peaceful coexistence of multiple cultures, and people are becoming more and more inclusive of different cultures. Chinese films should seize the opportunity of globalization, forge ahead and better tell the Chinese story to the world.

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