

A Comparative Study of Female Heroism in Chinese and English Films—A Case Study of *Mulan*

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From the perspective of cultural transformation and exchange, this paper analyzes the different interpretations of *Hua Mulan*, a female hero, by comparing the two versions of the film of *Hua Mulan* in the United States in 1998 and in China in 2009, and analyzes the differences in the construction of Female Heroism between China and the United States as well as the cultural roots of the differences. Film is a crucial carrier of culture. Social culture and values have influenced the interpretation of Female Heroism in the film, enabling us to better understand the different historical and cultural backgrounds and value systems of the two countries. It also discusses how we need to correctly carry out cultural integration and cross-cultural communication in the process of localization by selecting other national legends as the mother parent. Secondly, heroism is of great significance in all kinds of cultures, but there are more male heroes and few female heroes. This paper analyzes the interpretation and understanding of Female Heroism in different cultures, which has certain significance for the depiction of female heroes in various countries in the future.

Keywords: 1998 American *Mulan*, 2009 Chinese *Mulan*, comparison of female hero images

Introduction

Hua Mulan is one of the few heroine images in the history of Chinese literature. In the history of Chinese literature, she is the origin of female hero imagination. In *Mulan* poetry, *Hua Mulan* is portrayed as a brave woman and this image undoubtedly inspired many women. But *Hua Mulan* is still a docile woman who meets the cultural requirements of taking men as the center. Therefore, the female hero described in the context of Chinese culture has limitations. Taking *Mulan* poetry as the template, the United States and China successively launched the film *Mulan* in 1998 and 2009. China and the United States shot the same subject at the same time, providing rare materials for cultural comparative research. Social culture and values have influenced the interpretation of Female Heroism in the film, which enables us to better understand the different historical and cultural backgrounds and value systems of the two countries.

The embodiment of Chinese culture and Western culture in the film is the focus of many scholars. The film is filled by the American cultural elements in the framework of the Chinese story *Mulan*, which enriches the plot and character images. The culture in Disney film *Mulan* reflects Westerners' understanding of Chinese culture. There are certain cultural variations in the Chinese culture spread by Western countries. The culture embodied in the film is essentially a culture misunderstood by Westerners, and it embodies a film mixed with American culture

(Zhang, 2012). The film takes Chinese culture as the representation and actually spreads the adapted American individualistic values (Sun, 2015). Disney's film adaptation strategy is also suitable for us to learn. And we found that the important strategy of cross-cultural communication of Disney films is to pay attention to cultural selection and story adaptation, and create multicultural content suitable for global audiences. We should pay attention to the acceptance psychology of different audiences. According to the acceptance psychology of audiences in various countries, we should transform our national cultural resources into popularization and globalization, and add cosmopolitan elements to Chinese traditional culture (Chen, 2016). In the "interpretation of the film *Mulan* from a cross-cultural perspective", the author puts forward that the conflict between Chinese and Western cultural differences can be solved by some means, and multiculturalism can coexist.

From the perspective of cultural transformation and exchange, by comparing the different interpretations of the female hero "Hua Mulan" in the two films, this paper analyzes the differences in the construction of Female Heroism between China and the United States, as well as the cultural roots of this difference. This paper further discusses how countries need to correctly carry out cultural integration and cross-cultural communication in the process of selecting other national legends for localization in film and television. Secondly, heroism is of great significance in all kinds of cultures, but there are more male heroes and few female heroes. This paper analyzes the interpretation and understanding of female heroism in different cultures, which has a certain reference significance for the depiction of female heroes in various countries in the future.

Differences in Scene Setting

Hua Mulan's story has been widely spread in China. The Disney film company of the United States also adapted this well-known traditional classic story into an animation, which caused a great sensation after it was released and was loved and supported by most American people. However, this cartoon has a mediocre response in China and has not been loved and concerned by many Chinese people. The reason is that although the cartoon is adapted from Chinese traditional stories, it has a strong American cultural color and is divorced from the context of Chinese traditional culture. The scene settings in the two versions of *Mulan* vary from each other.

Differences in Family Background Setting

Chinese society was based on family. The ancient patriarchal system took the relationship between father and son, monarch and minister as the main axis. Interpersonal relationships are established according to seniority and do not stress equality. In the United States, the Christian concepts of "All men are equal before God" and "All men are created equal" in the declaration of independence make the idea of equality deeply rooted in the minds of Americans.

Father plays a vital role in both Chinese and American version of *Mulan*. In the Chinese version of *Hua Mulan* in 2009, *Mulan*'s father did not support her to practice martial arts. His father believed that women's martial arts practice was not conducive to marriage in the future, which showed that *Mulan*'s father had a very traditional gender concept and did not appreciate *Mulan*'s martial arts talent. The American version of *Mulan* has the unconditional love of her father and enjoys men's appreciation of women in her childhood, which makes the female self-consciousness of the American version of *Mulan* stronger. As a teenager, *Mulan* saved herself from danger by her "kung fu". When she landed steadily, her father appreciated his daughter's talent. The American version of the father image is ahead of the times that set in the film.

The Chinese version of the father followed more feudal ethics, making Hua Mulan's collective family and country consciousness stronger than self-consciousness. The American version of the father appreciates her daughter's talent, so Hua Mulan has become a more self-conscious woman.

Differences in War Background Setting

The Chinese and American versions of Hua Mulan are in different social and cultural backgrounds, so the war background of her surrogate is also different.

When the American version of Mulan received the edict of enlisting to resist the enemy, Mulan bluntly advised her father not to enlist. In the dead of night, Mulan shaved her hair, put on her military uniform, and embarked on the journey alone. This move is out of the protection of her elderly father and Mulan's inner self-reflection: "Maybe I didn't go for my father, maybe what I really wanted was to prove that I could do things right". To some extent, it can be said to be a kind of self-awakening. The domestic version tends to depict the reason for Hua Mulan's departure is a helpless choice. Hua Mulan brought tea and water for her father as soon as she appeared on the scene. Her words and deeds were dignified and elegant, which made it difficult to associate her with the battlefield. After her father received the conscription order, Hua Mulan decided to leave without saying goodbye and disguised herself as a man to go to the battlefield, because she was worried about her father's weak body. After being recognized by her fellow countrymen in the military camp, Hua Mulan also admitted that "I joined the army for my father only for filial piety and never wanted to build up establishment".

The Image Difference of Mulan

In different cultural backgrounds, personal value will also be different. From Hofstede's five dimensions of cultural differences, the main differences between Chinese and American Mulan's social values are collectivism and individualism. Additionally, two different Mulan shaped by Chinese and American culture also have great differences in the view of love and family.

Differences in Personal Value

At the beginning of the Chinese film *Mulan*, it introduces Mulan's father's poor health and why Mulan wants women to dress up as a man to join the army for her father. Mulan risked her life several times in order to win on the battlefield. Her army was surrounded and fell into despair. She still said to the generals and soldiers: "the generals can deceive me and the soldiers can betray me, but I will always be loyal to my country". Mulan has dedicated her life to the country and family. These manifestations are precisely the embodiment of the collectivist culture in Chinese society. She always puts the concentrated interests first.

In the Disney animated film *Mulan*, Hua Mulan hopes to prove herself and fulfil her ambition. Disney animated films incorporate Western concepts and shape Hua Mulan into a modern woman. In many crises, Mulan has been shaped into a savior with super power. American culture emphasizes initiative and success, and attaches importance to individual decision-making. They believe that success depends on their own creation, and they will not wait for the help of others or opportunities. Instead, they create opportunities to change their lives. This is the values conveyed by American films.

Differences in Love View

In the animated film, the hero is Li Xiang, accompanied by Mulan. In the live action film, the hero is Wentai, who has been sacrificing himself to achieve Mulan. These two male characters play an important role respectively.

The help and companionship of male identity to female characters reflect the different interpretation of the status of men and women in China and the United States.

Love and family responsibility make Chinese Mulan. After Chinese Mulan joined the army, love became her spiritual pillar. The gains and losses of love even affected Mulan's sense of responsibility to the country and as a general, and even made us feel that she is brainless in love. Even if a woman pretends to be a man and becomes a general, she cannot get rid of her feminine weakness and lose her reason in front of love. Mulan made a major mistake in military decision-making because she wanted to save Wentai, resulting in a premeditated attack on the soldiers guarding grain. The film focuses on Mulan's psychological withdrawal after experiencing the cruelty of the war, and believes that women are always weak and need to be protected; even the heroine Mulan is no exception.

The consciousness of the identity of others makes the American Mulan. Her transformation is based on her innate awakening of self-consciousness different from ordinary people. The American Mulan was born with this power. When she first appeared in the military camp, she decided not to hide her talent: take the bucket full of water to the top of the mountain with her own strength. Her comrades in arms look up to her from the bottom of the mountain and admire her. However, at this time, Mulan's female identity is not disclosed, and she exists as a male identity. Mulan's real transformation began when she came into contact with the witch of the Rouran army. The witch reminded her to be herself. Living in a lie cannot let Mulan play her power. In different camps, there is bound to be conflicted, and the witch's unique emotion for Mulan comes from the empathy between women. The witch sacrificed her life to save Mulan at the last moment, forming an emotional alliance between women in the film.

Difference in Female Heroism Narrative Techniques

The same subject, using different shooting methods, namely animation form and live shooting, has completely different visual impact and overall impression on the viewer. In addition, the switching of some classic shots and different shooting skills will also affect the effect and influence of cultural communication.

In the same story, China and the United States use two different forms of live action and animation respectively, which gives viewers a completely different experience. The animated version is obviously more vivid and brings a lot of fun to the audience. The most impressive is the big party about Mulan ancestors. Chinese people pay special attention to family inheritance, which can be shown in animation. In reality, ancestors can only be seen on the memorial tablets one by one. Cartoons can draw living people one by one. They hold a meeting to discuss how to bless Hua Mulan who has gone to war. They decided to send a dragon to bless Mulan, although later only Muxu went along, pinning the hope of the family. The expression here is novel and well integrated. Hua Mulan is not fighting alone, but with the hope and protection of the family. The real-life version is not reflected at all. Mulan is the only one who practices fighting among a group of men alone. Secondly, the Disney cartoon Mulan uses a lot of Chinese ink landscape background, which is undoubtedly very successful and gives people a real and illusory feeling. In addition, "Hua Mulan" is very exquisite in dealing with the scenes of war and fighting. The battlefield scenes are very grand and tense, and the final rescue operation is also very intense. However, there is no bloody picture in the whole film, which undoubtedly greatly reduces the age limit of viewing, which can be said to be suitable for all ages.

"Montage" is defined as "montage" in modern film aesthetics: "Montage is the principle of composing the combination of these elements by juxtaposing, connecting and determining their time". By a comparative study

of the scenes of the two films in the plot of “military night”, the animated films have repeatedly used montage editing techniques, and the images are combined with music or sound effects to narrate the story. Using one of the basic appearance forms the movement of the camera, that is, using the analogues in the lens to complete the handover of places, strictly following the sequence and continuity of time. At the same time, as a unique preset tool in animated films, the “stepping on” drum matching and transition is also the highlight of this part. However, in the live action film, *Hua Mulan* did not have clear lens language support from the transformation of state of mind to action. There were only two simple and rigid focus changes, and once again there was a sudden sense of abruptness in the protagonist’s cognitive self. At the same time, “montage” brings a sense of rhythm to animated films that cannot be matched by real-life films.

The Chinese version of *Mulan* combines visual and auditory elements, uses the techniques of narration, flashback, and sequence, and uses the means of film and television montage to narrate. Through abstract expression, the soldiers use hand cards and personal keepsakes to symbolize life on the battlefield. *Mulan*’s father’s weapons symbolize loyalty, courage, and strong father daughter affection. It is not only close to the life of Chinese people, but also has strong oriental traditional characteristics. Based on the montage technique, Disney film uses opera singing to reflect the protagonist’s psychological activities. The more classic is that a matchmaker introduces *Mulan* to a blind date, and her mother grooms *Mulan* in the hope that she can perform well, as well as sitting opposite her father at the end of the month after the blind date fails, singing her inner depression and doubt. Opera singing sets off the environmental atmosphere. At the same time, it seems more fascinating to cooperate with the way of opera singing and the animation version is good at using images for more intuitive expression.

Conclusions

Hua Mulan, the story of a female hero, had been rewritten several times since it was finalized in ancient times, but none of them had broken away from the cultural tradition of male center. Under this cultural tradition, the emergence of this image has not only inspired women’s courage to realize their ideals, but also brought many subtle negative effects. Therefore, rewriting this restricted heroine can not only reflect on the tradition, but also help to build and carry forward the female subject value and establish an equal, fair, and humane gender concept and gender order on the premise of emphasizing gender equality. The change of the image of a female hero also reflects the continuous development and change of cultural tradition.

This paper compares the image structure of *Hua Mulan*, a female hero, and the narrative logic of animated version and live version. Chinese *Mulan* is a victim, not only of the original family, but also of the country and lovers. *Mulan*, as a female, almost no longer exists, and her image is full of tragic color. American *Mulan* is unconventional, and her feelings for home and country have been weakened. The process of establishing *Mulan*’s self-identity makes us deeply feel the transformation of Chinese culture in foreign communication and the application of localization.

Therefore, when we choose other national legends as the basis for localization, we should correctly carry out cultural integration and cross-cultural communication according to our own values. Secondly, heroism is of great significance in various cultures, but since ancient times, there have been more depictions of male heroes, and more attention should be paid to the depiction of female heroes. The interpretation and understanding of Female Heroism in different cultures can be used for reference for the depiction of female heroes in various countries in the future.

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