

Study on cross-cultural interpretations of Mulan

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Abstract: Aiming at arousing people's cultural sensitivity, enriching people's knowledge of other cultures and increasing people's awareness of intercultural communication, the paper, based on the Ballad of Mulan and Disney Mulan, reaches some conclusions about cultural integrations and differences between China and America by comparisons and analyses of Mulan's images in the two subjects. Meanwhile, the paper illustrates the trend of "cultural glocalization" by way of case studies. Finally, the paper brings the conclusion that people should interpret transcultural outcomes from a broad perspective and with an advisable attitude, so that various cultures can achieve harmonious development in multicultural era.

Key words: Mulan; cultural glocalization; cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Mulan, a girl warrior who disguises herself as a man to fight against the Huns in her father's place, is a household name to Chinese. The legend lives on as it is passed from generation to generation through diverse versions such as storytelling, poems, and movies, etc. In 1998, the ballad takes on a new life when it becomes the theme of Disney animated feature Mulan which is shown around the world with tremendous success. This is the first time that Disney has ever drawn on an Asian story for making animated features and Disney's touch has made Mulan story a global legend.

We Chinese interpret the ballad differently, such as viewing Mulan as a filial daughter to sparkplug filial piety, or viewing her as a courageous soldier to spread patriotism, which are among the traditional virtues in Chinese culture. Audience around the world voice various views on Disney Mulan; however, Mulan, in the movie, presents fresh images such as an independent individual and a competent female, which is characterized of the mainstream of American culture, namely, individualism and feminism. To a large extent, the transformation from the ballad to the movie can be viewed as a dialogue between Chinese and American culture.

Since Mulan story has experienced quite a few reinventions in our own culture and in American culture as well, we will attempt to interpret Mulan cross-culturally, to explore cultural integrations and conflicts reflected in Disney Mulan by comparing with the Ballad of Mulan, to illustrate the notion of "tranculturation", and to understand the trend of "cultural glocalization" through the study of the Ballad of Mulan and Disney Mulan.

2. Cross-cultural interpretation of Mulan

2.1 Mulan's image in the ballad

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The original ballad is written in the form of "Yuefu"¹ poetry by an anonymous author in Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 A.D.) and collected in the Song (960-1279 A.D.) anthology of lyrics, songs and poems Yuefu. As the Chinese poem goes, Mulan is despondent because her elderly father has been drafted in a war fighting against the invading Huns. Since her father is too old to fight and she has no elder brother, Mulan disguises herself as a man to join the army in her father's place. Traveling 10,000 miles to fight against the enemy in numerous battles, Mulan courageously fights for 12 years without revealing her secret. At the military campaign's end, the Emperor thanks soldiers by granting them wealth, title and land. While Mulan requests only a camel, on which she might journey back home safely. Arriving home, Mulan discards her warrior's outfits and puts back on the traditional female attires. Her former military comrades are shocked to find out she is a woman. The ballad ends with a metaphor about two hares: male and female, which run as fast as they can, suggesting that soldiers do not distinguish between sexes in the midst of war.

2.1.1 A filial daughter

Mulan is first of all a dutiful daughter. Filial piety is especially canonized by Confucian ideology which has exerted great influence on our culture. The Chinese have a special term for filial piety, *Xiaobao*, which, according to Confucius, carries the following senses:

- (1) supporting and caring for one's parents;
- (2) reverence and obedience;
- (3) continuing the ancestral line;
- (4) glorifying the family name; and
- (5) mourning and ancestral remembrance.

(Yu, 1984)

That is, dutiful children will not only dress their parents warmly but also solve their worries and troubles mentally. According to the motivation of Mulan's joining the army, she is enlisted in the army in order to help her father get over the difficulty; rather than safeguard her country voluntarily. Mulan actually joins the army for the sake of her father and her family, practicing her filialness and love as the lines say, "Father has no grown-up son, Mulan has no elder brother. I want to buy a saddle and a horse, and serve in the army in Father's place" (Frankel, 1976). Mulan misses her parents wherever she goes showed in the lines "She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling; she only hears the Yellow River's flowing water cry tsien tsien. She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling; she only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu" (Frankel, 1976). When the Emperor thanks the brave soldiers by granting them wealth, title and land, Mulan requests only a camel, on which she might journey back home safely as the sentences state, "I wish to ride a swift mount to take me back to my home" (Frankel, 1976), which points out Mulan yearns her parents and wants to resume her role as a daughter to fulfill her responsibility of taking care of her parents. In history, Mulan is included in China's list of "Twenty-four True Daughters" and bestowed the title of "General of Filial Piety" in temples and by Emperors over the years (Ning, 1995). From this perspective, I think one of the potential themes of the ballad is to sparkplug filial piety, which is traditionally ranked among important virtues in our culture.

2.1.2 A heroine and a patriot

Some people hold the view that the Ballad of Mulan is a legend of a heroine. For instance, "The Ballad of Mulan presents a bold image of female in the feudal society" who breaks the feudal bandages and breaches the

¹ Yuefu meant, originally, the Han Dynasty office charged with supervision and collection of musical material, and also with composition and preservation of songs and poems employed in the offering of sacrifices. In time, in good part because of the affluence of these poems, all such material came to be called Yuefu (DING Zu-xin, 2001, p. 41).

traditional concepts about the roles of men and women imposed by the society (GUI Xu-dong, 2004). "To figure female image being good at riding, archery and fighting valiantly is one of the themes of the folk songs in North Dynasty" (ZHAO Xin-rui, 1999). In riotous times, women, if necessary, can do as well as men in terms of safeguarding their countries as the metaphor at the end of the ballad says, "The he-hare's feet go hop and skip, the she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled. Two hares running side by side close to the ground. How can they tell if I am he or she?" (Frankel, 1976) As a soldier, Mulan fulfills her duty to her country through her courageous and heroic acts embodied as her valor fights in numerous battles, patriotism we may call it. We agree with this point of view that the verse is a song of praise, giving high respect to women who have brilliant minds and courageous spirit and glorifying female with loyalty, filialness, bravery in the feudal society.

In this sense, Mulan is the role model for women in certain times, encouraging them in different times to fight for their own rights and their countries. For instance, in the twenties of 20th century, there are two films based on Mulan story, namely, *Mulan Cong Jun* and *HUA Mulan Cong Jun* voicing the sound of the time, namely, feminism calling women to free themselves and breaking the traditional bandages of family to enjoy the freedom of love and marriage. In 1939, the movie *Mulan Cong Jun* connected Mulan story with the theme of the time fighting against the invasion of Japanese, which spreads patriotism.

2.1.3 A traditional Chinese woman

In ancient China, family life is the vocation of most women through their lifetime who take care of their husbands, nurture children, do housework such as cooking and washing, etc. Women are dependant to men, abiding by the feudal norms imposed on them, for instance, the three obediences and the four virtues, and the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues. Men and women have their work and responsibilities divided explicitly, namely, men working outside like culturing crops, while women paying their time and energy to family life like spinning and weaving. It is true of Mulan, which is demonstrated from the first two lines, "Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek, Mulan weaves, facing the door" (Frankel, 1976). Before Mulan joins the force, she lives a traditional life as many maidens do in ancient China. When she returns home from battles, having hidden her real identity for twelve years, she makes herself up and dresses her female attires to resume her female identity immediately, which is reflected in the lines " 'I take off my wartime gown and put on my old-time clothes'. Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair, hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower-powder" (Frankel, 1976).

By describing Mulan as a traditional woman, the anonymous author from common people wants to express the theme of anti-war. "The ballad is a tragedy, presenting to people the devastation of valuable things in one's life" (HE Cheng-feng, 2005). Mulan admires stable and peaceful life, but wars make it just an illusion. The author describes fights in a concise and short manner, employing six lines, "She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war; she crosses passes and mountains like flying. Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots, chilly light shines on iron armor. Generals die in a hundred battles, stout soldiers return after ten years" (Frankel, 1976), which reflects common people hate wars, do not want to mention them in details and cherish peaceful and stable life. Mulan refuses every award offered by the Emperor; rather, she desires to go back home as quickly as possible. Arriving home, Mulan resumes her real gender which demonstrates she longs for the peaceful life with daily routines. To some extent, I agree to this view considering the theme of the ballad to be antiwar, which is conveyed in the sense of viewing Mulan as the image of a traditional woman.

In a word, people interpret Mulan's images disparately from different angles. There is no right or wrong among these views, from which I select the ones I prefer to as I've analyzed above by way of combining others'

theories with my stances. Next, let's move on towards the part of analyzing Mulan's images in Disney movie.

2.2 Mulan's image in Disney Mulan

2.2.1 The plot synopsis of Mulan

The movie is based on the Ballad of Mulan, reinventing the story of a young Chinese maiden Mulan (voiced by WEN Ming-na) disguising herself and joining the Imperial Army in her father's place after she is rejected by the local matchmaker. With the help of the sidekick, Mushu, a wise-cracking dragon (voiced by Eddie Murphy), Mulan survives the training camp. Weeks later, in the fight of Tung Show Pass, Mulan comes up with a novel idea of causing an avalanche, which brings the army to victory and saves Captain Li Shang. But, she is wounded, which reveals her real gender. Mulan is abandoned by the army. When Mulan decides to go back home with Mushu and cricket, she finds the Huns survive in the past battle. She decides to risk everything in order to save her country and she wins at last with her wit and efforts. Mulan does bring great honor to her family, become a hero in her time and find romantic love eventually.

2.2.2 A dutiful daughter and a brave soldier

It is a fact that Mulan joins the force disguising as a man out of her filialness and love for her father, as she explains to Captain Li Shang, "I did it to save my father...It was the only way! Please, believe me!"², after her secrete is revealed. As a soldier, Mulan consumes her responsibility heart and soul, risking her life to defend her country. She saves the army and Captain Li Shang in the Tung Show Pass fight, and what's more, she saves the Emperor and the whole nation with her intelligence and courage.

2.2.3 An independent individual

Disney film refigures Mulan as an individual pursuing and proving her self, following Disney narrative structure which consists of the hero's or heroine's miserable failures in society — escaping — self realization such as achieving one's life goals — finding an ideal spouse at last in a romantic love. Having been rejected by the local matchmaker who makes cruel remarks on Mulan's performance, saying, "You are a DISGRACE! You may look like a bride, but you will NEVER bring your family honor!"³, Mulan begins to ponder her real social status and identity which is reflected through the theme song reflection as follows.

Look at me ...I will never pass for a perfect bride
Or a perfect daughter
Can it be?
I'm not meant to play this part?
Now I see
That if I were truly to be myself
I would break my family's heart.
Who is that girl I see
Staring straight back at me
Why is my reflection someone I don't know
Somehow I cannot hide
Who I am, though I've tried
When will my reflection show
Who I am inside?
When will my reflection show
Who I am, inside?

We can grasp the contradiction in Mulan's heart, namely, being willing to be a filial daughter in her parents' eyes on the one hand, and desiring to be her self who is an independent individual on the other hand. Then, the

² *Mulan script*. Retrieved from http://www.fpx.de/fp/Disney_Scripts_Mulan.html.
³ *Ibid.*

war provides an opportunity for Mulan to prove her value and ability. In the training camp, Captain Li Shang states in the song "I'll Make a Man Out of You", "Once you find your center, you are sure to win"⁴, which points out sort of American individualism. In addition, Mulan's heart-to-heart conversation with Mushu when she is forsaken in the snow mountain upon discovery of her female gender, confessing, "Maybe I didn't go for my father. Maybe what I really wanted was to prove that I could do things right. So that when I looked in the mirror, I'd see someone worthwhile"⁵, emphasizes her passion to prove herself.

All these display the mainstream of American culture individualism that has long been part of the West's cultural fabric and emphasized the primary importance of the individual "existing as a distinct entity, self-reliance and personal independence"⁶. A strong theme that underlines Mulan's behavior is her pursuit of identity. To Disney Feature Animation President Peter Schneider, "Mulan is a very intimate, personal story about a loyal and brave girl who's going to find herself" (Kurtti, 1998, p. 189), and "the search for who we are and the search for self are an ever-ongoing process and universal theme" (Kurtti, 1998, p. 11). Barry Cook, the co-director, shares the same observation, saying, "I think Mulan celebrates the importance of an individual. Mulan shows what a difference one person can make" (Strauss, 1998). From this sense, Disney reinvents the story according to its production formula, profit-making purpose, global market strategy, American culture, and universal themes, etc., and refigures Mulan as an independent individual overcoming all obstacles in achieving her individual destiny.

2.2.4 A competent female

To many American reviewers, "Mulan represents female empowerment, winning her place by using her brains and relying on her courage and instinct, even when all the odds seem to be against her"⁷. In the movie, Mulan endures quite a few hardships such as training in the camp and earns the respect of her fellow warriors and their courageous Captain Li Shang by her persistence, diligence and strong-willedness. She helps the army defeat the Huns army with her brilliant mind in their first fight and saves Captain Li Shang. Moreover, Mulan, as a female, saves the Emperor who bows to her and the whole country who kneel down to her for her tremendous contribution to the victory.

The film reflects feminism in America, giving a high praise to female who pursues and fulfills dreams through untiring efforts. However, Disney stops short of making Mulan a manifesto of women's liberation. It takes a middle-of-the-road approach. It refrains from going to the extreme of feminism.

2.3 Cultural integrations and differences

Disney Mulan based on the Ballad of Mulan demonstrates the dialogue between Chinese culture and American culture from which we can see the cultural integrations and differences.

2.3.1 Cultural integrations

(1) Plot source

Disney, as a multinational corporation, requires a steady stream of novel ideas and constant reinventions of production. According to Mulan's co-director Tony Bancroft, Disney has to find "new and interesting characters from different locales and cultures, so that they don't all end up similar" (Strauss, 1998). Mulan, Disney's 36th animated feature, marks the first time that Disney makes use of an Asian story that is obscure to the rest of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Individualism*. Retrieved from <http://www.answers.com/topic/individualism>.

⁷ Naomi Ryerson. (7:20 p.m., April 5, 1999) *Mulan*. Retrieved from http://mrshowbiz.go.com/reviews/moviereviews/movies/Mulan_1998.html

world. Although Disney Mulan has been transformed in some significant ways, some core elements of the original legend remain: the movie is based on the Chinese folktale about a girl warrior who is willing to sacrifice herself for her father.

Besides, Mulan, either in the ballad or in the movie, joins the army on behalf of her father, dedicates her filialness and love for her father. The cultural identity of Mulan as a dutiful daughter is maintained in the movie, which reflects the respect for the original culture.

(2) Chinese cultural icons

Disney situates the new story amidst Chinese cultural icons such as the Great Wall, honoring ancestors, Xiangqi, Chinese costumes, dragons, the Chinese zodiac, Tai Chi, martial arts, paintbrush, the magnificent parade, acupuncture, dumpling, karst landscape, name a few, to create the visual pleasure with exotic scenes on the one hand and to retain the core and flavor of the original culture on the other hand. Disney utilizes "field trips which have become part of Disney's filmmaking process" (Kurtti, 1998) to enhance their respect for cultural authenticity and get a first-hand feel of the actual location of their screen stories. Disney hires a great number of Asians and Asian-Americans to design the characters taking on Chinese appearance: black hair, black eyes and yellow skin. For example, CHANG Chen-Yi, an artist originally from Taiwan, is a key force in conceptualizing the look of the key characters, including their costumes (Kurtti, 1998). With the assistance of Chinese musicians, the cartoon employs such Chinese musical instruments as temple flute (Chinese di), gu-zheng (Chinese zither) and the two-string (Chinese erhu) in songs. The movie maintains Chinese flavor as much as possible to integrate Chinese and American culture in the process of reproducing Mulan story.

2.3.2 Cultural differences

As we know, the Ballad of Mulan is quite short with only about 400 Chinese characters, which provides sufficient room for Disney to exercise its imagination and transfigure a new image, which is tinted with American culture. To Mulan's co-director Barry Cook, "that knowledge is liberating because they could let their imaginations kick in" (Kurtti, 1998, p. 25). The less historical and detailed is the original story, the greater the room for creativity is. The transformation from the original ballad to Disney animation demonstrates cultural conflicts between China and America as I conclude as follows.

(1) Tradition vs. freedom

As one of the cradles of human beings civilization, China "has a unique cultural system, which is characterized of the ideologies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism" (GAO Li, 2006). In the feudal society, women are in a submissive position to men and must hold their tongues in men's presence. In 2.1.4, we regard Mulan as a traditional Chinese woman who does such chores as weaving depicted in the first two lines and resumes her female gender reaching home by dressing up and making up at the end of the ballad.

On the contrary, America with its short period of history about 200 years is free from the bondage of the so-called feudal ideology. Americans pursue their distinctive personalities and cherish freedom. In the movie, Mulan is a free-spirited girl who does not readily conform to the traditional norms that are imposed on her. Having made a disastrous appearance in the face of the local matchmaker, Mulan decides to challenge the society's expectation for girls of being a bride to uphold her family honor. The war against the Huns offers Mulan the chance to fulfill her aims with free mind and individual actions.

(2) Family-priority vs. individual-priority

We Chinese are mostly family-oriented, "winning honor for families and ancestors to glorify family name" (GAO Li, 2006). The social ethic with the core of filialness and loyalty requires every one to commit his piety that

has been our traditional virtue and fealty that is the expansion of piety to his family and the country. In the ballad, Mulan is drafted in the army taking her father's place to bear her responsibility and duty of her family, and she misses her parents a lot during the time she is away from her family, and she returns home without hesitations when the war ends, which essentially praise Mulan's filialness and virtuousness.

In contrast, Americans are individual-oriented. They are unique individuals existing as distinctive creatures with independent thought and acts. The movie *Mulan* stresses self-awareness and the desire to materialize self-value, as I have analyzed in 2.2.3, regarding Mulan as an independent individual. In addition, Mulan in the film plays the leading role in the fights against the Huns either in Tung Show Pass fight or in the Imperial City fight, and eventually Mulan succeeds in realizing her self-value, demonstrating American individual heroism.

(3) Gender discrimination vs. feminism

Traditionally, the hierarchical concept takes root in China. Women are appendants to men, being treated inferior to men. "Mulan loses her gender identity and her discourse power before her going back home" (Li Shu-ying, 2006). Mulan succeeds in concealing her real gender for twelve years in the battle field, though we do not know how she can do it. Mulan in the ballad achieves quite a lot disguising as a man, if she is uncovered as a woman in the army, she will be punished by death according to the law against girls in the army. Although the course is a song of praise, glorifying female with loyalty, filialness, bravery in the feudal society, the feminism is moderate.

While in America, equality takes root in Americans' minds who believe everyone is equal in the feet of God, which is confirmed in *the Declaration of Independence*, saying, "Everyone is born equal". Women in America have struggled for equal rights politically, economically and socially since feminism movement in the sixties of the twentieth century. The cartoon shows the theme of feminism by changing the plot of Mulan succeeding in hiding her gender into Mulan being uncovered without punishment. When the soldiers sing the song "A Girl Worth Fighting For" to share their opinions on the ideal wife, Mulan voices her view on it, saying, "How about a girl who's got a brain, who always speaks her mind?"⁸ What's more, The Emperor bows to Mulan in face of all his people who then kneel down to Mulan for her courageous achievement that she obtains as a female. In our culture, it is impossible for the Emperor to bow to his subjects who make tremendous contributions to the country for thanks; rather, he will provide them with various awards. In a word, the film emphasizes feminism by figuring a heroine, Mulan.

Based on sources I have searched and my own understanding, I figure out the cultural integrations and differences between the original ballad and Disney movie by comparing Mulan's images in the ballad and movie. To a large extent, Disney *Mulan* is an ideal case to illustrate the notion of "glocalization", which I will analyze by comparing the movie with the ballad in the following parts.

2.4 Glocalization

2.4.1 Definition

First of all, I will give the definition of the notion "glocalization". The notion of "glocalization", put forward by Roland Robertson, means "the global production of the local and the localization of the global" (1995). The notion suggests globalization and localization, like the two sides of a coin, can not be divided. And Robert Holton says, "Glocalization has been used to suggest that the global and the local may be mutually reinforcing rather than necessarily in conflict" (2000). As is known to all of us, globalization is an important trend, which has to be

⁸ *Mulan script*. Retrieved from http://www.fpx.de/ip/Disney_Scripts/Mulan.html.

understood in conjunction with localization. For my part, globalization and localization are relative and they are in a dialectical relation affecting mutually. Here in my thesis, I will focus on the cultural glocalization.

2.4.2 Cultural globalization

With the advent of information technologies such as computers, satellite television, Internet, etc., the world shrinks smaller. The interrelationships between countries are increasingly characterized as interdependent, with the world viewed as a whole. The idea of globalization is quickly extended to the cultural realm to refer to the formation of a global culture, the cultural globalization we call it.

Back to Disney Mulan, which is based on an ancient Chinese folklore unknown to the West and other non-Chinese Asian countries, Disney's touch has made it a global legend, spreading Mulan as a household name to the world. To produce the movie, Disney makes great efforts to learn traditional Chinese culture and utilizes its featured approach named field trip to get first-hand information in order to maintain the Chinese flavor as much as possible. Disney Mulan exactly entertains its audience "with its exotic scenes, cute animal sidekicks for comic relief, funny in-jokes, emotional catchy songs and the like which are among the basic elements in Disney production formula" (Sinyard, 1988). Meanwhile Disney exposes its audience to Chinese culture, which, to some extent, distributes Chinese culture world wide. The worldwide success of Mulan has added a Disneyfied version of a Chinese legend to the world's popular culture.

2.4.3 Cultural localization

The imported culture has to be reinvented to accord with the mainstream of the culture in the country before it is accepted and prevalent in the country, even in the whole world. Disney Mulan has been transformed in some significant ways, taking on new images in the film: as an independent individual and a competent female, which demonstrates the typical American mainstream culture, namely, individualism and feminism. According to Mulan's co-director Tony Bancroft, he admits that there are limitations, "We knew we had to respect the material. This is a beloved story to the Chinese people. We also knew that we weren't going to make a Chinese picture. We couldn't. We're not Chinese. We have a different sensibility, a different storytelling style" (Kurtti, 1998, p. 24). Disney transfigures Mulan with American ideology, thinking patterns and value concepts, from which we can see the original Chinese ballad is localized and Americanized culturally. From this sense, I think what is foreign becomes indigenous. Meanwhile, the transformation from Chinese ballad to Disney movie enriches Mulan's cultural significances in the foreign land.

On a more general level, cultural globalization and localization represent the forms of transculturation which I will attempt to illustrate based on the ballad and the movie as follows.

3. Conclusion

In China, Mulan story has been rewritten many a time by writers, filmmakers, dramatists, and storytellers, etc. in different times. People extol Mulan as different figures, ranging from being a dutiful daughter to being a courageous patriot with themes of praising filial piety and strengthening patriotism respectively which are among traditional morality in our culture. Disney's touch makes the ancient Chinese folktale move forward towards the whole world with fresh images as an independent individual and a competent female, which conveys the mainstream of American culture: individualism and feminism. The transformation from the ballad to the movie which is among the diverse versions of Mulan story can be viewed as a dialogue between Chinese and American culture in forms of cultural integrations and conflicts. What's more, Disney Mulan reflects cultural globalization

and localization through which different cultures can achieve advancement in the era of multi-culture.

Evidently, people voice disparate attitudes towards the transformed animation feature, including the critical, negative one, the appreciative, positive one, and the moderate one. From my point of view, audience is supposed to grasp the underlined culture to cultivate and improve the ability of media literacy in order to understand foreign cultures better when enjoying movies. To a large extent, we should interpret transcultural products from a broad perspective and with an advisable attitude in multicultural era. Therefore, I can accept Disney movie because it enriches Mulan's images and significances being consistent with the local culture.

To sum up, cultural glocalization is a trend. People of different cultural backgrounds interpret the same transcultural product disparately; however, we should preserve the local culture, and understand and respect other cultures as well in intercultural communication, which I think is an advisable attitude.

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