

Taking Disney's Mulan as an Example: An Analysis of the Characterization of Western Films from the Perspective of Orientalism

-- From the Perspective of Spivak's "Subordinate Study" Theory

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the Western discrimination against Eastern women and the Western stereotype of the East reflected in “*Hua Mulan*” through an analysis of the characterization of the characters in “*Hua Mulan*”, a comparison of the filming techniques and scenes between the film version and the live-action version of “*Hua Mulan*”, and a discussion of the dressing of “*Hua Mulan*”. This article uses the method of comparative film analysis, the theoretical research of Spivak's subordinates, and the theory of Orientalism to analyze and explain the means of expression of the characters in “*Mulan*” and the defects of feminism embodied in it. Even with the awakening of feminism in the world, there is still a chain of contempt between women in the East and the West called “being ignored”, which is reflected in “*Hua Mulan*”. Behind the discrimination against Eastern women in the West is the problem of feminism itself. With the rapid development of technology, feminism is also developing rapidly. In the pursuit of equality, feminism should maintain an equal attitude towards women in the East and the West, seeking common ground while maintaining differences equally.

Keywords: orientalism, *Mulan*, feminism

1. Introduction

As one of the image representatives of China's “heroine”, *Hua Mulan* has been extolled in more than 1000 years of history, and its weight in the hearts of Chinese people is self-evident. The film is an adaptation of the story of *Mulan* joining the army, which is told by Yu Huxiao in China. In the fifth century, the Hun army, led by Shan Yu, attacked and invaded the Central Plains on a large scale. The emperor of the Northern Dynasty ordered each family to send one person to the front to combat the enemy. *Mulan's* father is old and inconvenient, but as the only man in his family, he has to enlist again. At this time, *Mulan* resolutely decided to join the army for her father. The 1998 animated film “*Mulan*”

has achieved remarkable success in its public praise, but 22 years later, the public praise of the live film “*Mulan*” has declined sharply. The essential reason for this cross-cultural adaptation of the film to lose both public praise at the domestic box office is the western deconstruction of the eastern ideological and cultural errors and the prejudice with the stereotype. The “loyalty, filial piety and fraternity” of Chinese traditional culture has been distorted into a pedantic environment, with *Mulan* breaking through the shackles as its main purpose; The wrong and disorderly stacking of Chinese symbols in the film reflects the spread of Western cultural hegemony. Although *Hua Mulan* is a representative role of feminism in the third world, she also intends to cater to the East from the western perspective in the film. This study hopes to be able to analyze the film “*Mulan*” by means of film analysis to reveal the feminist connotation behind it. In addition, this study will compare and analyze the characterization of the real and animated versions of the Disney film “*Mulan*” and introduce the perspective of an orientalist to analyze the reasons for the box office slump of the film “*Mulan*”. At the same time, this study will use Spivak’s “subordinate research” theory to explore further the third-world women presented in the film.

2. Analyze the Characterization of the Disney Film “*Mulan*” in the Live and Animated Versions

As a whole, the animated version of “*Mulan*” makes a great deal of fuss about fantasy properties, blurs the background of the times and increases the colour of fairy tales, for example, such fantastic creatures as “Wooden Whisker Dragon and Little Cricket” and the mysterious plot of “the villain assassinates the emperor”, including the scene of *Mulan* saving Li Xiang in an avalanche. These scenes are breathtaking and exciting and cannot be staged in real life. Thus, the overall positioning is just a princess film, which is far from real life or real history. On the other hand, the live-action adaptation of “*Mulan*” presents a more realistic portrayal of the story, with shooting scenes and settings that overlap with historical events. However, the film depicts the character of *Mulan* as a “superhero” capable of extraordinary physical feats, including climbing over eaves and walls.

The following analysis will examine the differences in character portrayal between the live-action and animated versions of “*Mulan*,” with a focus on the perspectives of the respective directors and the cinematic productions as a whole. The perspective of the two “*Mulan*” films also shows the transformation of the perspective of female consciousness due to the difference in the director’s gender. The director of the animation version looks at *Mulan* from the male perspective. Despite being depicted as a symbol of personal heroism, *Mulan*’s character is consistently relegated to a subordinate position associated with girlish emotions. For instance, in the original animated film, the general who harbours romantic feelings for *Mulan* ultimately visits her family as a guest and is rewarded with her love. In films directed by men, female characters are often reduced to objects of sexual desire due to the constraints of patriarchal consciousness. As such, while such films may present a narrative centred on women, they cannot be considered feminist in nature but rather films about women [1]. In the end, the 16-year-old *Mulan*, like every member of the Disney Princess series, finally reaped the innocent and wonderful love. The director of the live film, who viewed *Mulan* from the perspective of a woman, wanted to highlight her “heroine” character. In the live film, the director changed it into a general who gave *Hua Mulan* the sword granted by the emperor and gave her the determination of a sincere, brave, true and loyal soldier and won everyone’s recognition of her identity.

Animation is different from live films in that the characterization of characters can be detailed, especially when actors show their personalities. They can use rich expressions and forms to externalize. However, the animation is different. Due to technology and the audience, it is impossible to express overly complex characters’ personalities in animation. The characters’ personalities are simple and exaggerated [2]. Whether it is the main character or the secondary character, the personality is obvious. There are 1-2 personality defects. The more exaggerated the character is, the

better. However, the live-action version of the film pays more attention to the expression of human's natural emotion, and the character's expression is complex and real.

In general, although there are great differences in characterization between the live version and the animated version of *Mulan*, they both show extremely strong personal heroism. From the western perspective, *Mulan* is a loyal and brave female soldier. The thought of cultural hegemony embodied in Disney's live version of *Mulan's* films is a reflection of the thought of cultural hegemony, that is, the misinterpretation of Chinese history regardless of historical facts, that is, "the other imagination of China based on one's own attitude, interests, ideology, and value system, as well as Sino American relations"; The second is to borrow the plot of a Chinese story and put it on the guise of a Chinese story, in fact spreading the mainstream values of the United States itself, that is, "personal heroism values." [3].

3. Analyzing the Characterization of Western Films from the Perspective of Orientalist

In the field of historical research, the concepts and methods of "Orientalism", "The Other", and "Colonial Discourse Analysis" proposed in the book "Orientalism" form the theoretical foundation of postcolonial historiography that emerged in the 1980s. They criticize the inherent Eurocentric tendencies in Western historiography, eliminate the discourse hegemony of Western historiography, and reflect on the distortions and misinterpretations of Western historiography on the history of non-Western countries, And thus played a positive role in reproducing the history of non-Western countries [4]. Orientalism is the research which the West does on the culture, language and humanity of eastern society. From the perspective of Saeed, orientalism is a cultural behaviour in its origin, exhibiting distinctive literary characteristics in disciplinary construction, especially in academic works, and has inextricably linked to literary trends in its development [5]. The research can also be called the imitation and description the western writers, designers and artists do of the eastern civilization. Said thinks that it is a prejudicial thinking mode or a cognitive system which reflects that westerners despise oriental culture and fabricate the oriental culture at random. Orientalism's essential meaning is the cultural way that the West is in to control the East.

In the live-action film *Mulan*, the film shows the black circular buildings to viewers. The buildings depicted in the film are Chinese Hakkas "Tulou", which are typically situated in the Fujian region. However, it is widely acknowledged that Mulan is a legendary heroine who lived during the Northern and Southern Dynasties era. Historical records do not provide conclusive evidence that Mulan was a Hakka. Thus, the portrayal of her historical background in the film may be viewed as loosely based on factual information.

Disney's live-action version of "*Hua Mulan*" naturally wears a "shackle" to speak, which is based on the interpretation of traditional Chinese stories. Since the beginning, to satisfy the imagination of "exotic oriental", it has undergone simple symbol stacking, and a series of historical facts have been misunderstood [6]. In the live-action film *Mulan*, a mysterious witch is Mulan's reference. The witch's superpower is shown in the way that the typical western witch's magic is. For example, the witch's soul entered the prime minister's body to report the fake martial news to the emperor. She wanted to confuse the emperor by seeing and hearing in this way and relax the emperor's vigilance over the Xiongnu. However, in fact, the prime minister had no power to prevent the military messaging. The crooked fact shows that the West discriminates against the eastern political system.

In the live-action film *Mulan*, the description of the ancient Chinese court also shows that the West thinks that the ancient Chinese system is horrible all the time. Westerners use Orientalism to highlight their authority in adjudicating matters related to the East [7]. In the film, officials in court dressed the bright colours clothes. The emperor was only situated high on the ground. The prime minister satisfied the stereotyped image of the traitor minister. The light of the court is dark. All of these shows that the west fear and discriminate against the ancient Chinese political system.

Regarding Mulan's characterization, the film employs the concept of "qi" to represent the intricacy and advancement of the Chinese martial arts system, thereby satisfying the Western audience's curiosity regarding the enigmatic nature of Eastern power. In the live-action adaptation, a young Mulan chases after a chicken and uses her knowledge of Chinese martial arts to protect herself and safely fall from a rooftop. Her father commends her for her quick thinking and skill, but her mother and fellow villagers view her proficiency in martial arts with disdain, as the use of "qi" is traditionally reserved for men. In the film, "qi" represents a type of superpower that is often associated with the mystical abilities of witches and is viewed as a force that separates men's and women's power in society, leading to discrimination against women who possess this ability.

However, Mulan is able to utilize her knowledge of "qi" with dignity and grace when disguised in men's clothing in the military barracks. Her proficiency in martial arts earns her praise and encouragement from her commanding officer, who recognizes her unique skillset and values her contributions to the team.

However, in fact, the way of Mulan compromises and caters to the patriarchal society. In today's increasingly fierce cultural hegemony, Said's cultural perspective on the relationship between East and West has important value. However, the lack of historical materialism has led to an inability of Said to address the issue of cultural hegemony effectively. Chinese culture also encounters the dilemma of cultural hegemony in the process of "going global" [8]. Above all, the Chinese background, the characteristics of Mulan and the feminism which Mulan shows may be distorted by the western film shot.

4. Analysis of *Hua Mulan* with the Theory of "Subordinate Studies"

Spivak introduced the "subordinate study" into the field of literary practice of deconstructing classics. By comprehensively analyzing the "subordination" of characters, Spivak pointed out the dual implications of race and gender politics, aiming to expose the collusion between literature and politics, feminism and imperialism. First, there is no upward class mobility. Second, the subordinates cannot speak [9].

The 1998 Disney version of *Mulan* did not make much of a splash in China, but it was a hit in the West. At the time of Hong Kong's return, our national strength became stronger and more curious in the West. In their eyes, the East is full of mystery. However, since our culture was not fully in line with the world at that time, the "East" known to the West was distorted, one-sided and even outdated. So they did not expect that the "Hua Mulan" shape so aesthetically would fall flat in China. "*Hua Mulan*", with the Disney model of the frame of the character, in Western fantasy is strange and mysterious, but to the East, this image is "four different". In our traditional culture, "*Hua Mulan*" is brave and good at fighting with loyalty and filial piety. She was honoured by the Tang Dynasty emperor as a "filial general" and "women hold up half the sky". In Disney's version, *Mulan's* true identity is revealed, and she becomes romantically involved with her superiors. Moreover, in the annals of history, she has never been recognized. The image of "Flower Orchid" created by Disney seems to be independent and brave, with a strong sense of personal heroism, but the fact is that she is still a princess who needs to be saved by a prince or a knight. To a large extent, this shaping has reached the weakening of men's image of powerful women, and they have become silent "others" under the oppression of white centrism and male chauvinism. Spivak believes that in both history and literature, women have been branded as pariahs in the process of patriarchy and colonization. Under the dual construction of male ideology and Western ideology, women groups have become fictitious and imaginary "others" [10]. As the object of colonial history and the subject of rebellion, the ideological construction of gender has always been dominated by men. They can randomly make up the Prince in *Mulan* so that *Mulan* finally gets a happy ending because of her relationship with the Prince and her personal success.

To sum up, as a representative of women in the Third world, *Hua Mulan* enjoys high popularity in the international market. However, *Hua Mulan* brought third-world women to the world by catering to the East from the western perspective, but this “discourse” is not the real sense of discourse.

5. Conclusion

This article utilizes a film comparison approach to examine the characterization of *Hua Mulan* in the Disney movie and the real-life account of *Hua Mulan*. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the stereotypical representation of Chinese culture depicted in both films, providing insight into the Western perception of the East from the perspective of Orientalism. Drawing upon the theories of Spivak’s subaltern and Orientalism, this study investigates the potential for Western discrimination against Eastern women in *Hua Mulan*, thereby highlighting the issue of feminism itself.

In conclusion, the contemporary feminist movement has led to a global awakening of women, encompassing various social and cultural contexts, including the East and the West. It is crucial to recognize that true female independence and empowerment should be founded on mutual respect and solidarity among women worldwide, prioritizing the individual as opposed to regional or class-based categorizations.

This study contributes to feminist studies by exploring the Western representation of Eastern women through the character of *Hua Mulan* in the Disney movie. Drawing on Spivak’s subaltern theory and the theory of Orientalism, it highlights the potential for Western discrimination against Eastern women in the context of feminism. However, the analysis is limited to one case study and relies on media representations rather than empirical data.

Future research could expand upon the study by exploring other case studies and empirical data to further investigate the potential for Western discrimination against Eastern women in the context of feminism. Additionally, scholars may examine the impact of media representations on the social perception of Eastern women and the potential influence of these representations on Western feminist movements.

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