

# Analysis of Sino-American Culture in Disney Animation Mulan

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**Abstract:** This article takes Disney animation <Mulan(1998)> as the research object to analyze the Chinese and American culture in the animation. The first part introduces the background of the animation. The theme of the animation comes from the long-standing narrative folk song Mulan Ci during the Southern and Northern Dynasties of China, and it introduces the parallel montage of animation narrative. The second part narrates the Chinese cultural elements in Mulan, and expounds on Disney's use and blending of Chinese cultural elements from three aspects of ink painting effect, national costumes and Confucianism. From the perspective of Western culture, the third part analyzes how to integrate Western thought and characteristics, and contrast with Chinese culture in Mulan from three aspects: Mushu, character and hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Mulan; Sino-American cultural differences; Disney Animation

## 1. Introduction

This article adopts a comparative research method: collect the relevant graphic materials of Disney animation and Mulan background culture, compare the differences between the original Chinese image of Mulan and the animated Mulan, and summarize the application of Chinese culture on this basis.

Due to the unprecedented success of <Snow White (1937)>, it opened the door for Disney's literary works to adapt animated films, thus establishing the cornerstone and direction of Disney's animation film creation. Let regeneration culture become the stepping-stone for Disney's cultural products to enter the global market. Among them, "Mulan" is a very typical work. Mulan is a household hero in China, and the Disney animation <Mulan> was adapted from the folk song Mulan Ci of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China. It was also Disney's first animation created with the theme of Chinese cultural elements. There is a large amount of content combining Chinese and American cultures, with the heroine as the theme, and Mulan is shaped differently from the American perspective. This article uses the Disney animation <Mulan> as a research object to conduct a comparative study. How did Disney combine Chinese and American culture to create this animation.

## 2. Animated Background

### 2.1 Source Mulan Ci

Mulan Ci is a long narrative folk song in the north of China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and also a piece of Yuefu poems. It tells the story of Mulan posing as a man, replace father to joining the army, fighting on the battlefield, triumphantly returning to the dynasty, making meritorious powers, and resigning her home. However, according to the earliest description in The Ancient and Modern Music Records written by Shi Zhijiang, it can be proved that the time of its production is no later than that of the dynasty Chen.

Mulan Ci is a rare masterpiece in the history of Chinese poetry. For the first time in the poem, an immortal heroine's image for the army is created. Mulan possesses heroic character and unique female characteristics. She is kind, courageous, calm, resourceful, and persevering. Her love and dedication to her motherland is her greatest source of spiritual character. The whole poem is closely related to Mulan shi nv lang (MuLan is a girl),

from Bu wen ye niang huan nv sheng (She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling) to Mulan bu yong shang shu lang (Mulan has no use for a minister's post), from Mulan dang hu zhi (Mulan weaves, facing the door) to zhuo wo jiu shi shang (put on my old-time clothes), always has her female Features.

Poetry Poems is a combination of Chinese people's traditional moral spirit, optimism, and sense of humor, which is very different from the western comedy that is characterized by satire. Mulan Poetry fully embodies the natural characteristics of Chinese folk songs, the prominent use of paving, exaggeration, image sound, suspense, and it is very effective for rendering atmosphere and characterization. In the past, many believed that the foundation of the birth of Mulan Ci was the social customs of the Northern Dynasty that advocated the use of force.

In most of the animated films created by Disney, the material transformation model is adopted. It is advocated that literary works should only be used as the outer shell or reference for the adaptation of animated films, and only provide materials and inspiration for the animation. In the process of adapting to animated films, it can be based on the creator's idea for a second creation [1]. In <Mulan>, the details are try best to fit the original work, but the character of Mulan is changed, the moment when Mulan is recognized as a woman is like this series of different arrangements. This is a brand new interpretation of the original image, and it is also a re-creation of the original image.

## 2.2 The narrative method of the animation <Mulan>

Parallel montages are also called side-by-side montages. More than two plot lines are presented in parallel, separately described, and finally unified in a complete plot structure, or more than two events intersect each other to reveal a unified theme, or a plot. Parallel montages are widely used. First, because they are used to process the plot, they can be abridged to facilitate the summary, save space, expand the information of the animation, and strengthen the rhythm of the animation. In contrast, it is easy to produce a strong artistic infection effect.

This approach is Disney's habitual approach. For example, in <Finding Nemo(2003)>, when introducing Marin's past experience, the fish are used to share his experience as a link between the scenes of the scene, and to carry out reasonable inheritance, which indirectly expresses Marin's next position and situation. And in this animation, on the one hand, the army led by Li Xiang's father was fighting the Huns, and on the other hand, the army led by Li Xiang gradually matured and entered the battlefield. At the same time, Mulan's ability is also growing vigorously. The two clues complemented each other and gave a brief overview [2].

## 3. Chinese Cultural Factors in <Mulan>

### 3.1 Ink painting effect

The animation <Mulan> runs through the scene of Chinese ink painting from beginning to end, and starts with the magnificent Great Wall of China, which is buried in the foreshadowing of the atmosphere afterward. But all materials are processed by Disney's unique processing. This animation uses a total of 700 animators, artists, and technicians.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 1.** (a) The Great Wall in <Mulan>; (b) The Huns in <Mulan>

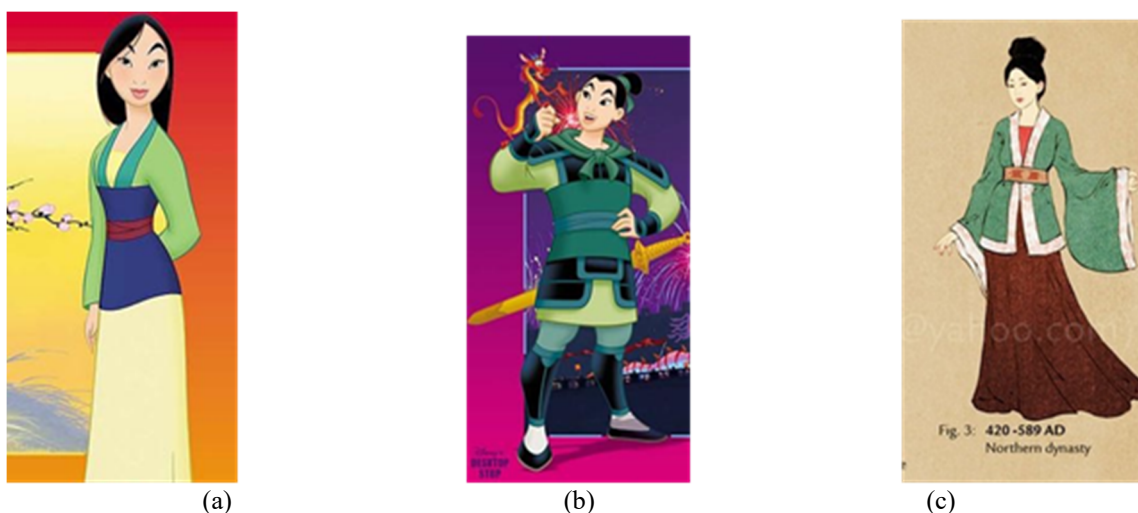
Three-dimensional ink animation technology began in the 1970s. With the emergence of super graphics workstations, three-dimensional geometric modeling technology, and realistic graphics generation technology have made great progress, promoting the rapid development of highly realistic three-dimensional computer animation technology and reaching practical Commercialization. It can create virtual images, which in the eyes of the audience can achieve the effect of ink painting.

It opened in the form of an ink animation with the Great Wall as the background (Figure 1). The Great Wall was originally a military defense project in ancient China. It was a tall, sturdy, and continuous wall, which was used to limit the actions of enemy riding. The vicissitudes of life and his immortality for thousands of years represent the will, courage, and strength of the Chinese people. So the animation started with the Great Wall as the background, and it also laid a foundation for the intense fighting atmosphere when watching the Huns. (Figure 1) The director of *Mulan* in order to make the scene of the animation more truly show the Chinese characteristics, once went to China to carefully observe the structure of Chinese architecture. When describing the scene of *Mulan* making an avalanche to fight against the Huns, Hollywood adopted a tremendous shot. The scene is quite magnificent, bringing a shocking visual impact to the audience [3], and at the same time creating an empty and condensed mood for the audience.

### 3.2 National costume and correct dress

In the animation, *Mulan's* dress fits perfectly with the dress of the Northern Wei Dynasty woman at that time. *Ruqun* and *Kuzhe* have a long history in Chinese dynasty clothing. The description of *Mulan's* clothing in *Mulan Ci* is very concise. Basically, the focus is only on the plot of her posing as a man. After the resignation and returning to the hometown, when she told her companions that she was a female body it also only *Dang chuang li yun bin*, *Dui jing tie hua huang* (Facing the window she fixes her cloud-like hair, Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder, and it is very little about her female dress). However, according to the textual research and interpretation of *Mulan Ci* after the Northern Dynasties, the period of *Hua Mulan* was the most consistent with the Northern Wei Dynasty, *Mulan's* headdress also is basically in line with the historical situation that women loved flower-shaped ornaments during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and often made ornaments into flower-shaped ornaments [4]. And *Mulan's* image was also relatively clear.

*Ruqun* is the most typical dress style of Northern Wei women. Before joining the army, *Hua Mulan* as an ordinary person, *Ruqun* can only be the most important dress in her daily life (Figure 2). *Ruqun* is the upper body undershirt and the lower body skirt, separated up and down, and there have different lengths of skirts, the skirt is long to reach the knee is the *ChangRu*, the skirt is short to reach the waist is the *YaoRu*. This kind of clothing was very popular during the Northern Wei Dynasty, and there are two ways to wear it. The skirt can be worn outside or inside [5].



**Figure 2.** (a) *Mulan* wears *Ruqun*; (b) *Mulan* wears *Kuzhe*; (c) Traditional *Ruqun*

If you wear it outside, you can wear a *Rushan*, the lower body is matched with a long skirt, and the middle is equipped with a belt. The style is very beautiful. The other style is also very beautiful that *Rushan* in the long

skirt. Because the main body of the Northern Wei Dynasty was the Xianbei ethnic group, it was deeply influenced by it.

In the mid-northern Wei Dynasty, Emperor Xiaowen made reforms for the prosperous and powerful country, and vigorously promoted the cultural customs of the Han people. Changes were also made in women's dress styles. The dress style of women's clothing changed in the past, and the wide-sleeved Yaoru style has become popular, which has become popular all over the country. Kuzhe is traditional nomadic clothing, which can be worn as court clothes, military clothes, and casual clothes, from nobles to civilians. Therefore, Kuzhe is undoubtedly one of the important clothes that Mulan will wear during the army and daily life. (Figure 2)

The character costumes in the animation generally show the charm of oriental art, but the cuffs of Hua Mulan's casual clothes are handled in the wrong way in the picture. In the ancient women's costumes, the sleeves were shaped. There will be no tight cuffs, either large openings or ordinary flat sleeves. In addition, the hairstyle in Mulan's classical dress is a typical Japanese style, and Mulan's uniform has typical Japanese armor styling characteristics, which is a typical expression of cultural and artistic confusion [6].

### 3.3 The integration of Confucianism

Mulan is roughly similar to the traditional Chinese values of Mulan Ci, which better reflects the core part of the story of the father joining the army-Confucian loyalty and filial piety.

In Mulan Ci, Mulan is a representative of ancient female images. Although Mulan appears to have joined the army on behalf of her father, Mulan still brings together the character of women. Although in the animation Mulan, Mulan is portrayed as a woman who is brave in pursuing self-worth, but this is different from the traditional women described in Mulan Ci as witty and courageous, loyal and filial, but still seen in the animation Go to Mulan's bones to reveal the traditional Chinese virtues of loyalty to the country and filial piety to the parents.

First, Mulan was in danger but did not panic, disregarding the dangers of her life, and caused an avalanche. Finally, she defeated the Huns and created a battlefield miracle of one enemy against everyone; Mulan's father sprained his feet even when dancing swords, because of the inconvenience of movement, he often carried a cane. But when he received the military order, he still lost his crutches and resolutely decided to serve the country. It's loyalty.

Secondly, Mulan cut her hair, joined the army for her father, and thanked the emperor's emperor for being crowned with good intentions, willing to return home to honor his family, which is called filial piety.

## 4. Western Cultural Integration Factors

### 4.1 Mushu--- New important partner

Compared to the image of the solemn and sacred dragon in China, Mushu is more American-style. Very different from the image of the Chinese dragon and appears as a companion.

Dragon is a symbol of auspiciousness in China, and its totem often appears in architecture, sculpture, and paintings. As a legendary species, the dragon has a profound cultural heritage and history in China. In ancient China, people believed that the emperor was a dragon reincarnated, and he was a descendant of the dragon, so in China, there is a certain amount of awe for the dragon and he will be treated with caution. It can be said that the dragon possesses the attributes of God. In Chinese myths and legends, dragons are in a leading position, while in Disney's animation, dragons have become human partners and assistants.

In many scenes of Mulan, dragon elements are used, such as dragon tattoos on soldiers, screens and dragon-shaped patterns on flags (Figure 3), and dragon head images on cannonballs. The most obvious image of Mushu (Figure 3) does not have the symbolic meaning of the Chinese dragon, but it is also clearly different from the image of the dragon in Western culture. Dragon is a symbol of evil in Western culture. The English interpretation of dragon is dragon. In some western authoritative dictionaries, the dragon is interpreted as referring to the legendary giant monster, which can breathe fire and have a fierce temperament [7].



**Figure 3.** (a) dragon-shaped patterns on flag; (b) Mushu

The explanation of dragon in the Webster's English Dictionary: an imaginary monster that was supposed to be a huge winged reptile, often spouting fire. Compared to the image of the solemn and sacred dragon in China, Mushu is more American-style funny, which is a choice made by Disney in the cultural integration.

The unique image of Mushu is a choice made by Disney in cultural integration [8]. To more reflect the uniqueness of Mushu, it is funny and shows its sense of responsibility as a mascot in the temple. Disney let Mushu adopt the black man voice sounds more lovable and funny. In many details, Mushu wears an apron for breakfast and takes care of Mulan. He also guides Mulan during the crisis and vividly shapes the image of animal partners. This is also the biggest reason Disney has always made people love it. Although Mushu is not as majestic and dignified as the dragon in Chinese hearts, it also meets the psychological expectations of Western audiences for the image of Chinese dragons. On the other hand, it also meets the psychological expectation that Mushu, a Chinese audience, does not appear as the image of a Western evil dragon.

#### 4.2 Character--- Convey the spirit of American thought

One of the most obvious factors in the integration of Chinese and Western cultures is in the image creation; Disney added many Westerners' thoughts and characteristics to the characters in the animation.

For example, Mulan, American Mulan is dominated by liberalism, but also has a strong feminist color. In Western society, emphasis is placed on equality between people, not in the Mulan Ci to shed blood for the country, but to emphasize individual struggle and self-realization. In the play, Mulan has this line: Maybe I didn't do it for my father: Maybe I just want to prove that I have the ability [9]. Mulan constantly breaks through traditional prejudices, constantly discovers and realizes herself, and finally finds the value of life through hard work, but more reflects the American-style liberal ideology.

The grandmother of Mulan also appeared as an old naughty girl. Believe that lucky cricket, carrying the cricket cage, crossing the road with her eyes closed. Also joked that Mulan should bring a man back, and she also wanted to go to the war, and then brought a man back. Although there are still Chinese superstitions in it. But it is very different from the ancient Chinese tradition and the conservative old woman who observes three obediences and four virtues.

#### 4.3 Hierarchical intersection

Since ancient times, China has paid attention to etiquette, forming a strong concept of respect for the humble and hierarchical order. In the Disney animation <Mulan>, there are lots of misunderstanding of traditional Chinese etiquette and hierarchy.

In the animation, after Mulan and Mushu will work together to defeat Shan, the emperor gratefully says to Mulan, You saved all of us [7] and bowed to her (Figure 4). The prime minister and Li Xiang and the people of the whole city knelt to thank Mulan. The emperor also put his personal ornament on Mulan's neck, and Mulan embraced the emperor and expressed his gratitude to the emperor. During the feudal period of imperial power thought, no one could exceed the rank of the emperor, and his behavior should be following etiquette, and there were detailed regulations. The emperor, as the head of a country, is a symbol of supreme power. He will never bow to ordinary people, and will not tolerate the subjects and people to bow down to others in front of themselves. But this paragraph is also Disney's recognition of the status of women. In a male respected society,



it shows the greatest respect for women-equality between men and women. It's not because Mulan is a woman and her rank is lower than Li Xiang's that all the honor are counted on Li Xiang.



**Figure 4.** The emperor bowed to Mulan

## 5. Conclusions

The Disney animation *Mulan* is a work that focuses on Chinese elements, and is the first time Disney has used Chinese culture to create animations. Although it is not in every way fully compatible with Chinese traditional culture, the elements of American thought and culture that it runs through give the characters and animations more fun and Disney features. *Mulan* had a US\$23 million box office record for the three-day weekend premiere in the United States since June 19, 1998. The animation has achieved US\$304,320,254 at the box office worldwide, which was already a good result at the time. Although the *Mulan* team did its best to integrate and balance their own culture based on Chinese cultural elements, *Mulan* was more in line with the image of Westerners, and a *Mulan* that was Americanized was born. However, Disney retains the most important cultural essence of *Mulan* itself-Confucianism, embodies the expression of positive energy, and promotes the integration and development of Chinese and American culture.

**Conflicts of Interest:** I declare no conflict of interest. I declare don't have any personal circumstances or interest that may be perceived as inappropriately influencing the representation or interpretation of reported research results. No funders.

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