

Topic: Disney's *Mulan* (2020)

Title: "Authentically Chinese": Critiquing Cultural Misrepresentation of Chinese Culture in Disney's *Mulan* (2020).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

Mulan is a traditional Chinese tale that speaks of a female warrior who goes to war in place of her ailing father. The very first known version of the tale, *The Ballad of Mulan*, was believed to have been passed down orally from as early as 400 AD, and it was first preserved in written form by an anonymous author during the Tang Dynasty (Naudus, n.d.). Since then, the story of *Mulan* has been “stashed, and repeatedly unpacked in China’s cultural house” (Mann, Susan, 2000), and there have been as many as 25 versions of the story of *Mulan* (Lohr, 2007). This shows the diversity of *Mulan*’s story and that even within China itself, there are very different versions of the same story. For example, in *Zhongxiaoyonglie Qiniu Zhuan* (The Legendary Story of a Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Heroic, and Chaste), *Mulan* commits suicide when she is faced with the dilemma between taking care of her parents and serving the emperor. She faces a conflict between 忠(loyalty), and 孝(filial piety). But in that version, the author had intended to criticise traditional Chinese feudal codes (Qing, 2018) by showing the tension between both values. This goes against the core value of the original story which was meant to show how one can be filial to one’s parents and be loyal to the country at the same time.

Disney has adapted this traditional folk tale into an animated version in 1998, and again into a live-action movie in 2020, further evolving the tale of *Mulan*. While the latest movie has been greatly appraised by American critics and has been slightly better received by the Chinese box office as compared to the 1998 animated film, overall it still performed poorly in the Chinese box office, generating only \$23.2 million in the first week (despite analysts’ estimation of \$30 to \$40 million). In particular, it has been strongly criticised in most parts of China for “its cultural insensitivity” (Shiah, n.d.), one reason being its all-white crew of director, producers, screenwriters and costume designers.

As Disney had wanted to customise *Mulan* such that it caters to the entertainment needs of people all over the world, *Mulan* becomes a “globalised product” (Tang, 2008). And even though Disney tried to include many aspects of Chinese culture into the film, there are still many ideological and historical inaccuracies in the film. Not only that, the film has been modified such that it does not authentically represent traditional Chinese values, and in turn, portrays Chinese culture as “exotic” to the extent of being irrational. While Disney claimed to have closely followed the original Chinese version of *Mulan*, the 2020 version seems to have continued the Western ideations of the traditional Eastern story of *Mulan*, leading to criticism of it being “orientalised” and thus the typecasting of Chinese culture.

Orientalism, first coined by Edward Said, refers to the fabrication of views by the West of Eastern people and their cultures, which leads to inaccurate perspectives of Eastern cultures, dividing the East and the West (Rowely, 2019). It was used as a tool to justify colonialism in the past (Al Jazeera, n.d.). While colonialism has diminished in modern society, orientalism can still be seen in the stereotypes that Western people have of Eastern people through the different forms of media and films, and *Mulan* is a prominent example of this.

This study aims to investigate misinterpretations of Chinese culture from Western point of view using Said’s theory of Orientalism to analyse differences between the original Chinese text, *The Ballad of Mulan*, with Disney’s version of *Mulan* (2020), to highlight the persistent stereotyping of Chinese culture in the Western world.

1.2 Rationale

In this paper, we will be exploring the various mischaracterizations in the live action Disney film *Mulan* (2020) and delve into the various reasons behind the angry backlash received from the Chinese population. We will be analysing the movie through the lens of Said’s theory of Orientalism and making a comparative evaluation with the original

Chinese *Ballad of Mulan*. Areas of focus will involve examining the conflict of the various gender stereotypes and highlighting the tainted lens of the American film industries in how they perceive Chinese culture in the way they had set and directed the film.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How does the cross-cultural reinterpretation of the legend of *Mulan* exhibit the inevitability of cultural infiltration between the context of the original text and the imagination of a culturally-different lens?
2. How do the depictions of Chinese culture from Western reinterpretations of the legend of *Mulan* present the key ideas and features of modern Orientalism (Edward Said, 1978)?
3. How do the differences in the portrayal of the protagonist in *Mulan*, from the Chinese *Ballad of Mulan* and Disney's *Mulan* (2020), reflect the different cultural ideations of what constitutes a great woman warrior?

1.4 Thesis statement

Through the lens of Edward Said's "Orientalism", this research paper seeks to examine how in Disney's *Mulan* (2020), Western ideals infiltrate and debase the value of the Chinese sense of identity, traditions, social norms and politics, by imposing its own imagined prototypes of the Chinese culture.

1.5 Methodology

In our project, we will be focusing mainly on the differences between cross-cultural representations of *Mulan* and contrasting them to shed light on the cultural and ideological differences between the East and the West. Firstly, we will be investigating

the notions of change when literature travels from one culture to another as well as the effectiveness or the effect of this 'change' (Qing, 2018). Hence, we will be using variability and heterogeneity as two key features to help us gain a better understanding of Orientalism. Our research leans heavily towards theoretical research rather than empirical research, and our analysis places emphasis on difference, so that the effects of cultural filtration in *Mulan* are seen.

1.6 Scope of research

The scope of this research is limited to the analysis of Disney's *Mulan* (2020) with close reference to *The Ballad of Mulan*, through the lens of Orientalism by Edward Said. *The Ballad of Mulan* would serve as a reference frame to trace how the story of *Mulan* has evolved into the one portrayed by Disney. The examination of the erroneous assumptions of cultural values in China by Western film directors and producers, leading to the inaccurate depictions of Chinese history in the film, can help to accentuate the power politics of Orientalism. This paper will not just focus on the character portrayal of Mulan herself, but also the portrayal of societal rules and norms in the world of *Mulan*, which is ancient China.

1.7 Delimitations

The focus of this research paper will be based solely on characterizations, settings of the film and its storyline, and not film direction, cinematography, casting, acting proficiency or the intentions of the film producers to produce a bigger box office. The research would also just be limited to the old Chinese text and Disney's *Mulan* (2020), without analysing the other 22 versions of *Mulan* due to word and time constraints. Disney's *Mulan* (2020) is chosen because it is the latest *Mulan* film, allowing a more accurate representation of how the story has evolved in modern time. This comparison also highlights how Disney's producers have made the effort to reduce the charge of Orientalism in *Mulan* (2020), but have not yet achieved a completely culturally sensitive film, since there are still signs of cultural appropriation in that movie. The film has received countless negative reviews

and critiques from the Chinese community, giving more opportunities to explore the extent of Orientalism's prevalence within the film.

1.8 Limitations

Although Orientalism involves the whole Eastern world, this research will only focus on aspects related to Western perceptions of Chinese culture. Furthermore, the Chinese text of the *Ballad of Mulan* is not the very first version of the story, but the oldest obtainable version and thus the research based on that text might not be fully accurate. Also, since this is a text comparison with the most current Disney film, it might not be conclusive in ascertaining whether other Western film producers over time had actually taken the effort to more accurately depict Chinese culture on-screen, as there will not be any comparison done with other past *Mulan* movies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This paper seeks to analyse how Western ideals infiltrate Chinese values in *Mulan*. This will be done by investigating cultural variations through a comparison of the original Chinese text and the 2020 Disney film, and evaluating the significance of the film adaptation. To do that, it is important to first understand some major aspects of Chinese culture that are inaccurately depicted in Disney's *Mulan*.

2.2 Traditional Chinese Values and Beliefs

Chinese people see themselves more as part of a community, rather than as individuals. Confucianism has guided this thinking. Confucianism is based on the principle of 仁爱, which refers to the caring and loving of other people. Confucius believed in the principle of “己欲立而立人, 己欲达而达人”(孔子, n.d.). He believed that when one wants to establish himself, one should seek to establish others. And when one wants to enlarge

himself, one should seek to enlarge others. In other words, Chinese people believe that what one does should lead to the benefit and development of the entire group and community. At the same time, Galanek (2018) suggests that the Chinese see themselves as “non-existent and yet connected to everyone”. In other words, Chinese see themselves as a part of a community rather than an individual unit, and are motivated to work together for the community.

This is unlike individualistic ideals in Western culture, where the individual is prioritised over the group. For example in the Disney film *Mulan*, the protagonist takes centre stage in battles and single-handedly saves the country. This may have been done with the intention of portraying a sense of heroism in the protagonist, but it instead also promotes individualism over communalism, which is not characteristically Chinese.

Filial piety can be seen as the first step in loving and caring for all, and it is believed that filial piety is a natural capacity in a human being, as seen from “夫孝，天之经也，地之义也，民之行也。”(孔子, n.d.). Confucius believed that like how the stars revolve around the Earth, and how all living things grow, being filial is natural and innate for all humans. Because it is natural and innate, filial piety is naturally seen as a social expectation and responsibility in Chinese society. In fact, filial piety is also used to demand obedience from children, especially from females, supporting the patriarchal society. This is reinforced by “人人亲其亲 长其长 而天下平”(孟子, n.d.). It is believed that because being filial is a prerequisite for peace, everyone should be filial. Furthermore, Knapp (2005) suggests that the Chinese family structure is based on “reciprocal bargain”, where the child must repay his parents for what they have expended in raising him. Hence, the sense of obligation one has to one’s parents can be used as a form of control in Chinese society. Ultimately, filial piety is not just a love for the family and ancestors, it is also a social obligation, and the huge generalization that filial piety is just “devotion to family” in *Mulan* (2020) is unable to encapsulate the complexity of the concept.

The Chinese believe that if there is a conflict of interest between the two values of filial piety and communalism, filial piety should take precedence, especially for a woman, and in this research paper, the female protagonist Mulan. This is seen through the expected role of women in society, as seen in 三从: “未嫁从父, 既嫁从夫, 夫死从子” ([仪礼·丧服·子夏传], n.d.) In Mulan’s time, women had to listen to their father at all times, and they were unable to fight for their country if their father did not allow it. Galanek (2018) explains that “Confucianism sees each and every set of relationships as fundamental links although losing intensity with distance”(refer to Figure A). Family links are stronger and more important than one’s allegiance to the country, and this is ignored in Disney’s *Mulan* (2020) as the protagonist decides to fight for her country without her father’s knowledge and approval. While her intentions might be good, she has actually disobeyed her father and placed nationalistic sentiments over her father.



How relationships are viewed in Chinese culture

Another prominent but misconceived idea of Chinese culture present in Disney’s *Mulan* is *Qi* (气), which is an integral element of Chinese martial arts, and which is why it is constantly depicted in the film through the female protagonist in a war setting. The word *Qi* in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) usually refers to physiological activity and functional vitality (Liu, 3). Thus, this term is often broadly translated as "life force" or "life energy" (Barrett, E.B.B. 2004). It is also “an energy that connects all things”

(Dahdal, M. 2020). As the Chinese believe in the presence of *Qi* within their bodies and its importance, they see the great need to actively engage and work well with the people in their community, so as not to suppress their *Qi*. In other words, when the Chinese strengthen the flow of *Qi* through practices like martial arts and Qigong (气功), they would, as a result, feel more connected with others. This could be one of the beliefs that lead to communalism being prevalent in Chinese society, instead of the Western ideology of individualism. Since *Qi* is in all living beings, it is not just limited to one gender. The *Yin-Yang* balance accurately portrays this ideal. The white and black sides of the *Yin-Yang* symbol represent male and female respectively. “*Qi* is not gendered; rather, masculine and feminine energy are represented in Chinese culture through *Yin-Yang* (moon and sun), which exist in harmony” (Shiah, S. 2020). This means that there is a delicate balance between masculinity and femininity, and there is nothing that is wholly masculine or feminine, such as *Qi*. It is important to note that *Qi* cannot be increased, but its flow can be controlled or strengthened through various means, like breathing in a particular pattern, which is Qigong as the Chinese would call it.

Disney’s *Mulan* also reflects the role of women in the patriarchal society of China back in ancient times. The patriarchal society in Chinese society is strongly seen in “未嫁从父，既嫁从夫，夫死从子”([仪礼·丧服·子夏传], n.d.). A woman had to obey her father before she was married, obey her husband after she was married, and obey her son if her husband had died. We see that the power imbalance between genders overruled seniority in the average Chinese household in the past and women were usually only given power in the household. This is unlike the loving relationship that *Mulan* shares with her father, or even the relationship between *Mulan* and her fellow soldiers (towards the end when she reveals her gender) in Disney’s *Mulan*(2020).

Furthermore, women had to follow a strict set of social norms, namely 四德: “德, 言, 容, 功”([周礼 天官 内宰], n.d.). A woman had to be disciplined, cultured, respectful, and her role in society was primarily towards her family. The essence of this is captured by Disney’s *Mulan* (2020), as said by the matchmaker, “Quiet, composed, graceful,

disciplined — these are the qualities we see in a good wife. These are the qualities we see in Mulan.” Women had to live up to society’s standards during those times. They could not behave in a way that seemed violent, for it was going against the moral standards set for women. If a woman’s mannerisms were different from how she was expected to act, she could be heavily judged by others and had fewer chances of getting married off, becoming a disappointment, as well as a burden to her family.

However, at its purest, one may argue that there was equal value placed for each gender in ancient China, through the appreciation of the *Yin and Yang*, which were considered as two “equally important and complementary”(Zhu, 2018) elements in Chinese culture. Zhu (2018) describes *Yin* and *Yang* as such: “*Yang* is the part of strength, power, and outgoing, while *Yin* is the part of quietness, gentleness, passiveness, and suffering.” By association, masculinity represents strength and power, while femininity balances it with quietness and gentleness. Therefore, one can argue the distinction is more complementary rather than being in conflict.

2.3 Orientalism

Orientalism, as coined by Edward Said, refers to “a way of coming to terms with the Orient [any place that is East of Europe] that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience”(Said, 1979). He argues that Orientalism was used to justify colonialism by picturing the East as exotic and irrational, and henceforth, they needed to be governed by a higher power (i.e. the West). Orientalism artworks are often shown to have 2 typecast characteristics. First, “[artworks of the Eastern world by Western artists] depict an exotic and therefore racialized, feminized, and often sexualized culture from a distant land”(Demerdash, n.d.). This contributes to the justification that the Eastern world needs to be governed by the supposedly more enlightened West. Second, “[these orientalist artworks] simultaneously claim to be a document, an authentic glimpse of a location and its inhabitants, while in fact, the artwork may just be part of the artist’s imagination of the Eastern world” (Demerdash, n.d.). Hence, orientalist artworks create a

false reality of Eastern cultures, in turn leading to misconceptions and prejudices of the East, further dividing the East and the West. Simply said, orientalism can be considered as a form of racism that is propagated through cross-cultural artworks.

Traditional orientalists construct a layer of what Demerdash called “exotic ‘truth’ even though the scene they represent may be “out of [their] imagination”(Demerdash, n.d.). Hence, while they think that they provide an accurate representation of the Orient, their views are often biased as they portray the Orient as “rooted in incivility” or as “passive or licentious subjects” (Demerdash, n.d.).

By producing the image that the Orient was uncivilised, Orientalism then “provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which “the West” constructed “the East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or “rescue” (Arab American National Museum, 2011). By portraying the Orient as inferior because it was different, Orientalism provided an acceptable justification for imperialism.

When Orientalism occurs, Western philosophers, who claim to have a deep understanding of Eastern cultures, may transpose Western ideals on Eastern cultures, creating a Western image of Eastern cultures, which is often inaccurate. Understanding how Orientalism works “provokes unrest in one's conscience about cultural, racial, or historical generalizations, their uses, value, degree of objectivity, and fundamental intent...draw[ing] attention to the debased position of the Orient or Oriental as an object of study”(Said, 1979). Said argues that such consequences had so great an impact that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (Said, 1979). Said said that “from the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself.” Orientalism corrodes Eastern cultures and homogenizes them together into the stereotype that the Eastern world was uncivilized, often forgetting the many nuances in different Eastern cultures. In fact, the usage of the word “Orient”

suggests how many cultures of the East have all been generalized under the broad term “Orient”, and these cultures lose their respective uniqueness.

Not only that, Westerners who want to understand Eastern cultures may not have a balanced viewpoint of Eastern cultures because they are under the influence of certain biases, set in stone by the colonizers before them. In that sense, “those (from the West) cannot separate themselves from the orthodox perspective of the Orient; it is inscribed in their very being, and even those whose profession is to treat their subjects with objectivity cannot do so” (Vickery, 2012). Said says that “the Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert” (Said, 1979). And because the “Western expert”, who could be the Western media, politicians, artists and writers, portrays the Orient as exotic and chaotic, many ordinary Westerners think the same way and it is difficult to get an “accurate, objective study”(Vickery, 2012) of the Orient from the Western perspective.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

3.1 Misrepresentation of the Physical World of Mulan

Disney’s *Mulan*, like many orientalist films, tries to create a layer of “exotic ‘truth’” in the world of Mulan. We first see this through the architecture and construction of Mulan’s home. Mulan’s home, as portrayed by Disney, is actually a *tulou*. This is a very inaccurate portrayal of the houses in China back in the Qing dynasty. While the *tulou* did exist in China, it was only constructed in the Tang Dynasty, which was almost 300 years after Mulan’s story. So while this may seem very “Chinese” to foreigners, the architecture is inaccurately depicted and broadly generalized with architectures from other eras of China. This disregard for accuracy suggests a sloppy attitude and the innate stereotypes the Disney crew have of Chinese society, that the Chinese were underdeveloped and

backward throughout their long history, and that they were very traditional and did not evolve and change.



Chinese *Tulou*. This architectural form was only seen in the Tang Dynasty(618 - 907 AD), while *Mulan* is believed to be set in around 400 AD. (Mulan, 2020)



The inaccurate portrayal of the houses in *Mulan*. This form of housing was only invented in the Tang dynasty, 300 years after the Qing dynasty, which was when Mulan was born.

3.2: Misunderstood Concepts of Traditional Chinese Culture

3.2.1 *Qi*

A widely misunderstood concept within the film is *Qi*. From the start, the film introduces the idea that the power of *Qi* could only be wielded by males, not females. This is evident when Mulan's father tells her at the start of the movie, "Your *Qi* is strong, Mulan, but *Qi* is for warriors, not daughters." In reality, *Qi* is innate in everyone in Chinese culture, and can be harnessed by everyone. The *Yin Yang* concept also emphasises that everything has a balance, and that opposites exist in harmony. The light and dark sides of the *Yin Yang* symbol can represent masculinity and femininity respectively, implying that *Qi* has to strike that balance between both aspects to truly exist. Furthermore, *Qi*, at its purest, is a life force, and sustains life, and it does not allow one to suddenly have magical powers, like shapeshifting (as what happens to the Witch in Disney's *Mulan*). Disney does this to make the Witch overly powerful, adding an aura of mysteriousness in her *Qi* and Chinese culture as a whole, suggesting that Chinese culture is exotic and somewhat superstitious too, and by extension, primitive. This example presents *Qi* as some sort of "force" that can simply make one stronger than the rest, when it is much more complex than just that. As in Traditional Chinese Medicine, the balance of *Qi* throughout the body helps one maintain one's health, not a power that one releases during activities like when in combat. The words "wield Chi" was used by Mulan's father, which suggests that *Qi* is actually more of a weapon that can be used for the user's benefit. Also, her father tells her to "hide (her) gift away." These two phrases have neatly emphasized how Disney misconceives *Qi* as a superpower. Even though Mulan is not originally a Disney character, Disney has created another version of her, where she is comparable to Elsa, another Disney princess from the animated film *Frozen*, who hides her powers from everyone else, and is also called a witch when her powers are revealed. In comparison

with *The Ballad of Mulan*, it seems like *Qi* is a whole new concept added into the *Mulan* film. There was no mention of Mulan being naturally gifted in combat and having powerful *Qi* to help her rise above the ranks in the army. However, Disney has simply incorporated *Qi* into the movie as an excuse to let Mulan have some sort of superpower. Instead of going according to *The Ballad of Mulan*, Disney produced the film based on their own Western perceptions of the woman warrior and their past experiences making Disney princesses, culturally appropriating the concept of *Qi* itself and rendering the film superficial.



The use of the words “wield chi” suggests that chi is more a weapon than a form of life energy (Zhao, 2020).

3.2.2 Phoenixes and Witches

Disney also uses significant Chinese cultural symbols and distorts their original meanings. For example, Disney symbolises the phoenix as a mythical creature which “is consumed by flame... .. and emerges again.” While there are phoenixes in Chinese culture, the interpretation of the phoenix that Disney uses is the western interpretation, which suggests that the phoenix is a symbol of “resurrection”(Mendia-Landa, 1998), while the Chinese believes that the phoenix represents the ascent of a new emperor or the dawn of a new era. Furthermore, Disney describes women who have a strong *Qi* as

“witches”(when describing both the Witch and Mulan), which itself has a negative connotation as witches, in Western context, tend to bring misfortune wherever they go. However, in Chinese culture in the past, women who practised magic, known also as shamans, were often consulted for good purposes, including how to ward off evil spirits. Therefore, Disney, as seen through Western eyes, assumes that these women had used their power to harm others, while in fact they did not.

3.3 Individualism Versus Communalism in Heroism

In *The Ballad of Mulan*, Mulan decides to go to war solely because she wants to take her father's place, as seen from “愿为市鞍马，从此替爷征。” The word “愿” suggests that Mulan is willing to go to war because it is her only option to be filial to her father, and creates the impression that Mulan going to war is a sacrificial act. However, in Disney's *Mulan*, Mulan's choice to take her father's place is a conscious personal decision, suggesting that she has agency. Besides doing it so that her father does not have to go to war, she does it so that she can be as “brave” as the men, and so that she does not have to “bring honour” through marriage, but through fighting in a war. She is depicted as resisting the traditional place of women in society and challenging the social stigma against women. It seems that Mulan wants to break the social expectation of women much more than she wants to protect her father from the violence of war, removing the significance and the strength of what loyalty truly is in the Chinese culture.

Disney brings forth the idea of individualism in heroism, which goes against the communalism ideals of Chinese culture mentioned previously in the literature review. We see time and time again Mulan standing out from the crowd and fighting alone. This is seen when the whole battalion is busy defending themselves against the catapults of the Rourans, and Mulan is somehow able to escape and single-handedly causes an avalanche, completely annihilating all the Rourans. Disney highlights Mulan's heroism and wit as the protagonist, but it also suggests that one person alone can defeat an army and do the impossible, which is unlike what was admired in Chinese culture then and even now. In

contrast, in *The Ballad of Mulan*, the army works as a team, and there is no mention of Mulan being better than her peers. Rather, it is the fact that she is a female yet she is able to thrive in the male-dominated army that makes her special. Furthermore, in Disney's *Mulan*, Chen Honghui(Mulan's comrade) tells her, "You need to find the emperor." When blocked by Rourans, Honghui and the rest of Mulan's comrades fight the Rourans, while telling Mulan to save the emperor herself. The word "you" suggests that Mulan is the one destined to save the kingdom, and the word itself suggests that the task of saving the emperor is a task that could only be done by her and her alone. Disney has smeared individualistic ideals over the Chinese communal culture and the poem itself, all pointing to the inevitability of cultural infiltration from the West into the original Chinese poem.



Mulan. Here the image of the mystical phoenix behind her creates the impression that Mulan is the hero "chosen" by the upper beings, and only she could save the kingdom.

Furthermore, Disney suggests that people should break out of their social status, which is in fact not the case in Chinese society. This is prominently shown by Mulan, who is a woman, and whose job is to bring honour through marriage. However, she chooses to go

to war. Although she acknowledges her identity as a female, she still remains as a warrior for the kingdom and succeeds in saving the emperor. Disney shows that everyone can be whoever they want to be and succeed despite their set of fixed characteristics, like gender or race, which overlaps, in turn affecting how one is viewed by society. This is unlike Chinese views of communalism, where everyone has a role to play such that society can prosper together. Indeed, in *The Ballad of Mulan*, there is no mention of her wanting to break away from her social status nor her gender in the first place. For example, the ballad states that “唧唧复唧唧，木兰当户织。” At the start of the ballad, Mulan embraces her identity as a woman as shown from the action of weaving and managing household chores, and even when she is a warrior, she plays her part in order for the army to succeed. Chinese society views that one should stick to one’s social status as well as play one’s part in the communal division of labour, which is what is truly best for society, but Disney misinterprets and misrepresents this by suggesting that one should break free from one’s social status to be oneself.

3.4: Feminism and Gender Identity

While the female identity may be seen as equal yet oppressed in the Chinese society, and while *The Ballad of Mulan* is a story that suggests gender equality amidst a patriarchal society, Disney’s *Mulan* has over-exaggerated the extent of feminism that *The Ballad of Mulan* is trying to promote. In *The Ballad of Mulan*, there appears to be a preconceived notion that women are weaker and are not meant to enrol in the army, but Mulan challenges the social norms and expectations and breaks free from her gender restrictions by enrolling in the army and proving that a woman can thrive in what was previously thought to be a man's world, although her intention was merely to serve in place of her father. However, in Disney’s *Mulan*, Mulan appears to gain her recognition by having physical abilities that stand out from the rest, which puts her a notch above the rest. Besides, she is shown to embody and personify feminism by having intentions to prove to the witch that a woman can lead in a man’s world. *The Ballad of Mulan* portrays female strength in a more subtle way, whereas Disney’s *Mulan* amplifies feminism to the extent

that it undermines the status of men. This deviates from the original intent of the poem to portray that gender and one's power and ability are extraneous, as is inherent in “双兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌?”, which conveys the idea that it is impossible to discern the difference between the two genders if they are given the same starting point.

However, Disney, at the same time, also sends mixed messages as they suggest that women are of lower status as their responsibilities are conceived to be of minimal importance, as compared to men through Disney's portrayals of other female characters. Disney suggests this by characterizing the other women as on 2 extremes. They are either feeble and highly dependent or overly aggressive and loud. In the film, Mulan's sister is depicted to be the “ideal” woman, sticking to the gender norms and meeting the expectations of a traditional woman who is subservient and ever ready to please the men with the hope of catching a husband. Her squeamish fear of spiders is added to show how women are weak and in need of protection at the slightest threat. On the other hand, the witch in Disney's *Mulan* is depicted to be an unorthodox and unconventional woman, who breaks free from the general expectations of a woman by publicly displaying her physical powers. Yet, ironically, her powers are portrayed as beast-like and frightening to all, and thus considered unnatural and abnormal. There is then the suggestion that for a woman to have those kinds of physical powers, they cannot and will not survive in the patriarchal society as they have deviated from the social norms. Hence, by placing women at two extremes, it appears that Disney is trying to portray that women are being unfairly subjugated to weakness in Chinese society, and that they are stuck in this vicious cycle, in which deceit is the only way to break free, as in the case of Mulan.

Although Disney's *Mulan* propagates the idea of feminism, there are many instances where femininity is still delineated as inferior to masculinity. When Mulan initially establishes herself in the army camp as a strong soldier, she ironically does so by undertaking the typical male characteristics, such as brute force and physical strength, rather than playing to her feminine characteristics, like wit, compassion and social skills,

which are more nuanced and subtle and thus less obvious. This accentuates the stereotype that overtly strong masculine characteristics are more useful and practical in society, and are vital for success. In ancient China, including the period Mulan was set in, both men and women had a tradition to keep long hair. Chinese men were mandated to keep their hair tied up in a knot, otherwise it was considered unrefined and improper. On the other hand, Chinese women had the habit of wearing their hair down, especially for washing. In the scene where Mulan was taking a shower, the fact that she dared to strip bare and shower showed that she was expecting to be alone, yet she still chooses not to let her hair down to wash, suggesting that she has already made it a habit to act like a man. This could also be because her experience in the army camp has given her a glimpse into the amount of recognition and success a man can get in society, which causes her to develop an innate desire of becoming male-like. Hence, while Disney is encouraging the values of feminism, it also does not deny the hegemonic masculinity which exists in the patriarchal society, which justifies the dominant social roles men have over women.

In a scene in *Mulan*, the soldiers were tasked to carry 2 buckets of water up the mountain, with their hands stretched out straight to the sides. Mulan was able to successfully conquer this challenge by outperforming men in terms of sheer resilience and brute force, which are traits typically associated with males. While this was aimed at showing that men are not necessarily stronger than women, when carefully examined, this whole training scene indulges in the concept of hegemonic masculinity, by reiterating that women can only challenge the social stigmas in a patriarchal society if they possessed more masculine traits than a man. Disney could have chosen to depict another training routine where Mulan could employ her feminine traits such as her intelligence and compassion, but they did not. Instead, Disney elevated Mulan via her masculine traits as she excelled in a training which only tested her physical strength, hence restricting the propagation of feminine traits such as intelligence and compassion. This gives the audience the impression that women can only be successful and recognised by society if she “mans up”, and not by developing their own feminine qualities.

Disney shows that a great woman warrior is one who is exceptionally strong physically. This is seen through the introduction of *Qi* in both Mulan and the witch. Mulan and the witch are, in the movie, seen as exceptionally strong characters because they are able to fight and shapeshift. For example, it is Mulan's skill that has led to her becoming a respected woman warrior. This is unlike what the poem has portrayed, where Mulan is a great woman warrior who is strong, not because of her abnormally strong *Qi*, but because she is able to thrive in a man's world, and she sacrifices herself and forces herself to survive in a man's world for her father. Hence Disney removes the significance of Mulan as a woman and a person, and replaces it with the power of *Qi*, making Mulan seem great not because of her values that we can learn and respect from, but because of her abnormally strong *Qi*. This removes the sense of heroism and greatness that we get because she becomes like any strong warrior.

Lastly, Disney *Mulan* shows the inevitability of cultural infiltration through the difference in ideal body types for women across cultures. Chinese and Western perceptions of the ideal body type for women are different. In the Western world, the "perfect" figure for women is curvy, with a small waist, big breasts and hips. In contrast, the most desirable body shape for women in Chinese culture is to be as slim as possible (Coy, K., 2021). However, Disney's *Mulan*'s description of the ideal woman seems to lean towards the one from Western perceptions, shown by the soldiers comments of "I like my women buxom" and with "strong, wide hips" when talking about their desired woman. Disney has made the assumption that their own western beauty standards are universal, and thus portrayed Chinese preferences for body shape wrongly. This shows that Western perceptions are plastered over Chinese culture in the movie, and there is a change in the Chinese ideals presented by Disney. Disney has, in a way, created their own version of the ideal Chinese woman with their own beliefs and understandings, further emphasising the extent of Orientalism in the film.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

While Disney has attempted to depict the Chinese world of Mulan into the film, their interpretations of various aspects and elements of Chinese culture have clearly shown a Western infiltration, highlighting a lack of understanding of the significance and depth of Chinese history and beliefs, generalising and bordering on stereotyping of characters and Chinese values. This suggests that cultural infiltration is inevitable between the context of the original text and the biased imagination of a culturally-different lens unless there is more effort taken to be true and sincere in wanting to understand the unique world of Mulan.

Disney's *Mulan* also shows that Orientalism is still present in modern art forms. Disney's *Mulan* reveals that Orientalism still acts as a culturally-appropriating lens, whitewashing the aspects of Chinese culture which do not align with the West's perceptions of Chinese culture, and in the process depicting a China that is backward and primitive. Therefore, they propagate what they think they know about Chinese culture, which is often inaccurate and unreliable. Their simplistic understanding and ignorance are concealed with the addition of seemingly Chinese-looking elements, with the attempt to convince audiences that what they are portraying are true, making them the "expert" (Said, 1979).

Mulan has been loved by generations of Chinese because of her selfless deeds, her willingness to serve her parents and the country, and her boldness to challenge social stigmas in a patriarchal society. However, Disney seems to show that Mulan is a great woman warrior not only because she is brave to accept her identity as a woman, but primarily because of her raw strength and superior skill. This has distorted the more nuanced characterization of Mulan in the Chinese ballad, and thus further accentuates the fact that Disney tries to establish its own imaginary prototypes of Chinese culture.

To the Western audience, this might be acceptable, if not unnoticeable, because the elements added make the film seem “Chinese” and the film’s portrayal of Chinese culture aligns with their understanding of Chinese culture, but to many Chinese viewers, the generalised stances and not too subtle adaptations through Western lens are almost repulsive. Thus this research concludes that Disney’s *Mulan* does not truly encapsulate the rich significance and nuanced depth of the real Mulan’s story nor does it portray Chinese culture accurately to the world because of the lack of depth in understanding the character of Mulan and Chinese values.

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ANNEX B: THE BALLAD OF MULAN (Naudus, n.d.)

唧唧复唧唧，木兰当户织。不闻机杼声，唯闻女叹息。

问女何所思？问女何所忆？“女亦无所思，女亦无所忆。

昨夜见军帖，可汗大点兵。军书十二卷，卷卷有爷名。

阿爷无大儿，木兰无长兄。愿为市鞍马，从此替爷征。”

东市买骏马，西市买鞍鞞，南市买辔头，北市买长鞭。

朝辞爷娘去，暮宿黄河边。不闻爷娘唤女声，但闻黄河流水鸣溅溅。

旦辞黄河去，暮至黑山头。不闻爷娘唤女声，但闻燕山胡骑声啾啾。

万里赴戎机，关山度若飞。朔气传金柝，寒光照铁衣。将军百战死，壮士十年归。

归来见天子，天子坐明堂。策勋十二转，赏赐百千强。

可汗问所欲，“木兰不用尚书郎，愿借明驼千里足，送儿还故乡。”

爷娘闻女来，出郭相扶将；阿姊闻妹来，当户理红妆；

小弟闻姊来，磨刀霍霍向猪羊。开我东阁门，坐我西阁床；

脱我战时袍，着我旧时裳；当窗理云鬓，对镜帖花黄。

出门看火伴，火伴皆惊惶。“同行十二年，不知木兰是女郎。”

雄兔脚扑朔，雌兔眼迷离。双兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌？