

COMMENT ON “STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EASTERN CULTURAL COMPLEX - TAKING MULAN AS AN EXAMPLE”

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COMMENT ON “STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EASTERN CULTURAL COMPLEX - TAKING MULAN AS AN EXAMPLE”

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As pointed out by Ding (2024), In 1998, Disney made a bold move to adapt Mulan’s traditional Chinese story Mulan into an animated film, *Mulan*, which was well received by audiences around the world. Mulan’s image in the film is still as famous as Snow White’s and Cinderella’s popular images in Disney films. After the success of the animated version of *Mulan* in terms of box office and word of mouth, Disney once again chose Mulan’s story and adapted it for the second time into a live-action film, *Mulan*, which was released in 2020.

Mulan’s story, presented in the live-action film, can be said to be a subversion of the original text *The Ballad of Mulan*. Due to the background of the times and the cultural differences between the East and the West, Mulan’s image that traveled across the ocean to the United States was once again injected with new connotations and values, presenting a different image. As the author pointed out in the paper, the film embodies the exploration of the Eastern culture on the value of women’s strength and courage, and its core is the expression of feminism.

In the movie, Mulan is a legendary heroine. She disguised herself as a man to join the army for her father, went through many tests in the military camp, completed one arduous training after another, and finally saved the emperor with her own wisdom. The emperor also expressed his high appreciation for Mulan and gave her a plaque to show his affirmation of Mulan’s wisdom. Disney’s romantic imagination with Western colors is added to the story.

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Mulan no longer treats her father with respect in traditional Chinese culture, but talks to her father in the garden as an equal. The feudal concept of male superiority and female inferiority is not deliberately maintained, but Mulan's bravery and wisdom, as a female image, are more displayed.

Unlike the Chinese adaptation, in the film created by Disney, Mulan realizes her self-identity and affirms the women's value. Influenced by the Taoist idea of the mutual generation of *yin* and *yang*, Chinese traditional culture emphasizes the harmony and complementarity of *yin* and *yang*. Therefore, the earliest female characters, constructed in Chinese stories, are fair and selfless, and are described in a position that corresponds to, complements or balances with men. Since the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu has established a strict hierarchy system, in which women are classified as "*yin*" and "inner", obeying "*yang*" and "outer" men, and expelling women to a subordinate position lower than men. Mulan's image is a limited resistance under this hierarchy. Although she "ran away" from the system where women live inside, her purpose of going out to join the army is still to maintain the feudal system and the family's, the country's, the monarch's and the ministers' order.

In the adaptation of the Chinese local context, the twelve years of military life did not expose Mulan's identity, but let her fight on the battlefield like a man, realize her self-worth in a man's way and cover up the essence of her female identity. However, in Disney's movie, Mulan's identity was exposed in the war, and finally she defended the emperor with her own strength and was recognized by the emperor and fellow soldiers. She did not stop hiding her female body until she returned home, but went to the emperor's palace to accept the reward as a woman. At the end of the movie, the emperor personally bestows the sword on Mulan. As a symbol of man's strength and power, the sword is bestowed on Mulan by the general sent by the emperor, the supreme ruler. It is a recognition and acceptance of the female group, represented by Mulan, by society. The reward is a metaphor for women having the same "civil rights" as men.

The film sets up many plot interludes in the narrative process, allowing Mulan to express the space of her ideal woman, reflecting her resistance to the women's image under the traditional discourse of power. During the march, the comrades discussed the lovely girl in their hearts. In the description of the girl in their dreams, the female body was objectified, aestheticized and commercialized, and the male desire was expressed through the form of dialogue among men. The comrades described the ideal woman who had a beautiful face, decent and generous clothes, was diligent and family-oriented in action, and worshipped men in spirit. In the final analysis, she was a servant serving men. The patriarchal society has created "perfect women". They are beautiful, well behaved, passive, waiting to be saved by men and have nothing to ask for except marriage. Mulan's answer broke the discipline of traditional discourse of power, lifted the physical constraints on ideal women, believed that

women should also enjoy the initiative, and demanded to pursue independent personality and quality in spirit.

The witch's plot and Mulan joining forces in the film reflect that women are beginning to seek to unite and break through male discourse. After Mulan was expelled from the military camp because her female identity was exposed, her conversation with the witch shows the two female characters' powerful abilities and their ambition to move from the margins to the center of power and gain social recognition. Mulan has superior martial arts and the ability to lead troops to fight as a general. These qualities are all highly “masculine”, highlighting that one of the themes of the film is that, when society gives women access, they can also meet male norms and even do better. Through Mulan's great victory at the end, she was recognized by the emperor and his subjects, and she gained rewards and social status in the social symbol production system controlled by men. The feminist orientation of the plot is very obvious, showing the powerful call of the film for women's self-awakening and women's liberation.

It is true that the film *Mulan* is relatively successful in expressing feminism, but it also has some problems that cannot be ignored when dealing with the reconciliation of Eastern and Western cultures. The most important point is the expression of the concept of “filial piety”. The “filial piety”, embodied by Disney, is not the “filial piety” full of hierarchical colors in traditional Chinese culture, but a modern parent-child relationship that emphasizes equality and love, and has a Western “individual-oriented” spirit. To this day, China has introduced Western culture in a relatively comprehensive manner, and this kind of individual-oriented parent-child relationship has long been accepted. Therefore, the “filial piety” culture with Western consciousness, conveyed by the film, can also be understood and accepted by Chinese audiences. However, the expression of “filial piety” in the film actually casts a shadow on the expression of feminism.

Mulan's “joining the army” is the main theme of the film. This setting completes a distinct feminist expression, but her motivation of “replacing her father” is patriarchal, because the concept of family is constructed on the basis and framework of patriarchy and male power. At the end of the film, when Mulan saved the emperor and was appointed as the commander-in-chief of the guard army, she refused and chose to go home as soon as possible to seek forgiveness from her family. Family honor is always above Mulan's personal value, so Mulan broke free from the shackles of patriarchy and eventually returned to the embrace of patriarchy. Mulan had just completed the transformation from a girl to a female warrior, but, in the end, she turned back into a docile daughter. Although the film uses modern love to balance the hierarchical color of traditional Chinese filial piety, this reconciliation does not change the essence of Mulan's embrace of patriarchy. Therefore, in a sense, the reconciliation of Chinese and Western cultures also casts a shadow on the expression of feminism.

REFERENCE

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