

Original Research Article

# The Cultural Communication Significance of the Mulan Films Made by Disney

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**Abstract:** In September 2020, the live-action film “Mulan” shot by Disney in the United States was released in mainland China. This is the fourth time that Disney has put Mulan, a traditional Chinese character, on the screen. The first time was the animated version in 1998. After the success, the “Mulan II” was released in 2004, the third time was the 2012 animation version for children. This time, Disney put this historical story that is well-known in China on the screen in the form of a live-action version. The Chinese elements presented in these four versions are undoubtedly obvious. Although many people in China think that the Mulan created by Disney is not the Mulan in their minds, and the interpretation of traditional Chinese culture in the play is not necessarily accurate. However, by observing Chinese traditional culture from Westerners’ vision and interpreting Chinese traditional culture with Westerners’ concepts, Disney’s efforts objectively played a role in spreading Chinese traditional culture on a larger scale. It shows the traditional Chinese values of “loyalty, righteousness, courage and filial piety” and the two unique Chinese cultural symbols of dragon and phoenix to audiences all over the world, at the same time, the concept of caring for women and publicity of individuality is integrated into it, which makes this traditional character have a strong contemporary character and is more easily accepted by modern audiences. Its significance in cultural communication is worthy of recognition.

**Keywords:** Mulan; Disney; Cultural Communication; Film

## 1. The historical and cultural connotation of the Mulan story

### 1.1 The historical evolution of Mulan’s image

As a cultural image, Mulan is not constructed at once. The earliest record of Mulan’s story is “Mulan Ci” (or “Mulan Poetry”) in the “Yuefu Poetry Collection” edited by Guo Maoqian in the Song Dynasty. It recounts the legendary story of Mulan disguising herself as a man to serve her father in the army, highlighting Mulan’s filial piety to her father and her pride in her female identity. Here, Mulan has a name but no surname, and her parents, family and people around her are all anonymous.

In addition, in recent years, there have been dramas, dance dramas, operas and drama versions of “Mulan”, and even the action role-playing game “Mulan” has appeared. It is diverse and has a wide impact.

Disney has given Mulan’s image new connotations from the perspective of Western mainstream culture, which has transformed her from the group memory of the Chinese nation into the group memory of human society.

### 1.2 The historical and cultural connotation of Mulan story

One is to do filial piety for his father and pretend to go out. In “Mulan Ci”, Mulan is just an image of a filial daughter serving her father in the army, and the author did not give her more mission. Regarding her motives for joining the army, “Mulan Ci” said that “Grandpa has no eldest sons, and Mulan has no eldest brother. She is willing to be a pommel horse for the city, and from now on, her father is declining.” Do your filial piety, disguise yourself as a man, and join the army for your father. In “Mulan Ci”, there is a verse saying “I will leave my grandfather and my mother and stay next to the Yellow River at night”, which shows that she disguised herself as a man and joined the army for her father was supported and encouraged by her family. This is directly related to the characteristics of the times and national characteristics at that time. As we all know, the Northern Wei Dynasty was a regime established by the Xianbei people. It was only after entering the Central Plains that they began to accept the influence of Confucian culture. Many values in the traditional culture of the Central Plains had not yet become the universal codes of conduct in the society at that time. For example, for women’s contempt for and restrictions on their behavior, girls’ military service is also a common behavior that people are used to. However, “filial piety”, a core value of Chinese traditional culture, has taken root in the hearts of the people.

## 2. The deep cultural background of Disney telling the story of Mulan

“Mulan Ci” has gone from traditional Chinese folk songs to international perspectives, indicating that it has the basic elements of cross-national and cross-cultural communication. The reason why Disney chose it to make Mulan one of Disney’s eight princess animations, and to interpret this story in different forms repeatedly, is precisely because of the universal value of this story itself.

The characteristics of feminism and individualism in Mulan resonate with Americans’ emphasis on individual freedom of thought and freedom of action. Mulan in “Mulan Ci” is not only a brave heroine, but also a gentle, reasonable, diligent and virtuous lady. At the beginning of the poem, the image of a traditional lady was vividly outlined in 10 words: “Chirps and chirps, Mulan is a household weaving”. And the end of the poem reads “Open the door of my east pavilion and sit on my bed in the west pavilion. Take off my war robe and wear my old clothes. When the windows are arranged on the temples, the mirrors have yellow decals.” The impatient move to restore gender characteristics fully demonstrated Mulan’s inner dream of a lady.

On the surface, this is an American interpretation of Chinese traditional culture, but after in-depth thinking, is it not the good quality of the characters themselves. The existence of this quality constitutes the basis and prerequisite for the cross-cultural spread of Mulan stories.

## 3. The communication significance of telling Chinese stories under world vision

The so-called cross-cultural communication refers to the exchange activities between two individuals, groups, or organizations with different cultural backgrounds. Film and television works are not only a bridge for Westerners to convey their ideas, but also an opportunity to promote Chinese culture. The mainstream Western culture emphasizes fairness, justice, and freedom, makes everyone equal under the rules, and emphasizes human rights and unlimited freedom. With the rise of China in recent years, the spread of Chinese culture is also very important. The release of the movie “Mulan” first represents the recognition of the value and significance of traditional Chinese culture by Western mainstream culture. The rise and strength of China has made Western culture have to deeply understand and re-understand Chinese culture. At the end of the film (live-action version), on the sword that the emperor gave to Mulan, in addition to the original three words of loyalty, courage, and truth, plus the word filial piety, it also represents Westerners’ acceptance and recognition of traditional Chinese values. Fourth, it shows the strong vitality and commercial potential of Chinese traditional culture. Hollywood movies have always been the big brothers of movies all over the world. The selection of Mulan’s theme this time is not only to recognize Chinese culture, Disney, as the core of the business, but also to see the commercial potential of Chinese culture. Chinese culture has been passed down for 5000 years and can be passed down. It also proves the strong vitality of Chinese traditional culture.

## 4. The proper attitude to the interpretation of Chinese stories under the world vision

Disney tells the story of China, no matter what, it is a good thing. In the face of many doubts on the Internet, I think it is unnecessary. The biggest feature of traditional Chinese culture that distinguishes it from Western culture is tolerance. Only with tolerance can you have tolerance. The so-called “Inclusive of all rivers, tolerance is great.” Therefore, when dealing with Disney’s telling of Mulan’s story, and even dealing with all Westerners’ telling of Chinese stories, if it is not malicious or deliberately distorting, we should all adopt the following attitude:

The first is support. This is not only the integration of Chinese culture and Western culture, but also an opportunity to promote traditional Chinese culture.

The second is tolerance. Although the Western understanding of Chinese culture may not be very accurate, it may be different from our inherent concept.

To make more Chinese stories become world themes, we must study the universal value of traditional Chinese stories. The story of Mulan is a condensate of the traditional values of Chinese society. The excellent quality embodied in her has become the outstanding cultural gene and value concept of the Chinese nation and an important part of the soft power of Chinese culture. Whether we can tell the Chinese story well and make it more acceptable to more people does not depend on whether it is a Chinese tradition, but on the attitude we use to pass it on and how to tell it.

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