

Prejudice in Films in Cross-Cultural Context: Take the Example of Mulan

Shiyin Xu*

Department of Advertisement, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

*Corresponding author: xusy733@nenu.edu.cn

Abstract. International communication has become more and more frequent in recent societies, but misunderstandings and miscommunication due to stereotypes inevitably exist in cross-cultural exchanges. Therefore, this paper would analyze the live-action film *Mulan*, a Chinese story told by Disney that reflects the stereotypes of Chinese culture from the Western perspective. Due to the cultural differences between China and the U.S. (such as the different pursuit of individualism and collectivism), the filmmakers' misunderstanding of the story, especially the important plot of *Mulan* replacing her father in the army, Disney sets the core viewpoint of the story as *Mulan* pursuing proving herself, instead of the traditional Chinese culture's understanding that *Mulan* makes the decision to take her father's place in the army for the sake of her family and the country's collective interests. There are many other stereotypes in the film, these stereotypes have caused dissatisfaction of Chinese audiences with the film. The paper gives some suggestions to improve the acceptance of cross-cultural film and television works in the local market, like investors can choose local market cultural figures as the film's main producer. The film producer should be rigorous in the examination of local culture and it is better to choose the local language for the dubbing of cross-cultural films. This paper profoundly analyzes the situations and causes of misunderstandings and deviations in cross-cultural communication and provides suggestions, which to a certain extent improves the efficiency of cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural film and television production in future.

Keywords: *Mulan*; stereotype; cross-cultural communication; collectivism; individualism; film.

1. Introduction

International communication has become more and more frequent in recent societies, but misunderstandings and miscommunication due to stereotypes inevitably exist in cross-cultural exchanges, thus causing conflicts and disagreement between different groups [1]. As a channel to spread culture, the stereotypes carried in film and television works can influence audiences to form stereotypes of other cultures [2]. Thus, it is important to analyze the stereotypes present in these films and television series. According to Zu Xiaomei, a stereotype refers to the formation of a preconceived view of a foreign culture before knowing other cultures, and the application of this preconceived view to all aspects of the specific country [3]. According to Hu, the biggest limitation of stereotypes is that they generalize and ignore individual differences [4]. The reasons for stereotypes that appear in films are rarely studied, especially in cross-cultural films. Whether the cultural context depicted in the film is recognized by the local audience determines whether the film has international universal value.

Therefore, this paper starts with the live-action film *Mulan*, a Chinese story told by Disney. The film reflects the stereotypes of Chinese culture from the Western perspective. Through a case study approach, this paper analyzes the characters and plot design of the live-action film *Mulan*, as well as the evaluation of the live-action film *Mulan* by Chinese audiences. It seeks to understand the differences in the understanding of Chinese folk tales from the Chinese and Western perspectives and the stereotypes that reflect the differences. The paper also proposes suggestions for cross-cultural film and television productions from the perspective of improving the market acceptance of local audiences.

2. Case Description

The “Mulan” live-action film was shot by Disney and released in 2020. It tells the story of the ancient Chinese woman Mulan dressed as a man, on behalf of her father’s army, bravely battling Roran. The film mainly shows how Mulan is in the case of maintaining bravery, loyalty and dutifulness while still adhering to the true self of the journey. Disney invited Nicky Caro, the director of *Whale Rider*, who is very good at telling women’s stories, to direct the film, and also invited a number of international Asian actresses and actors, such as Liu Yifei and Donnie Yen, to star in the film. By doing so, the film was supposed to be a “sincere” blockbuster with an investment of \$290 million. However, after the film went online, it drew a lot of negative comments from Chinese audiences.

Many commented that “the film shows Chinese culture wrongly” and that “it is a Western film with Chinese background promoting American values”. Why are Chinese audiences dissatisfied with this “big production”? Behind this problem are the different perspectives of the East and West on the understanding and interpretation of Mulan.

The stereotypes in this film present the Western understanding of Mulan, which also becomes the main basis for the Chinese audience to criticize the film. Therefore, studying the stereotypes and their causes in the live-action version of Mulan can, on the one hand, provide suggestions for the localized market acceptance problem faced by cross-cultural film production, and on the other hand, provide a reference basis for the weakening of stereotypes in cross-cultural communication.

3. Analysis of the Problems

There are many stereotypes in the live-action Mulan film. For example, the witch, who is powerful and almost omnipotent in sorcery, is considered to be a representative of the mysterious power of the East from the perspective of Western audiences, but a symbol of Western witch culture from the perspective of Chinese audiences. Another example is the setting of “Qi”, which is odd to almost all audiences. “Qi” is usually understood as “life energy”, and everything has Qi [5]. According to the setting of the film, as long as one can use “qi” flexibly, one can realize the potential of one’s body and even become other creatures like what the witch can do, and only people who stay true to oneself can use “Qi” well. In the Eastern perception, “Qi” can be cultivated by all beings, but in the film, only a few gifted people such as Mulan and the witch can use it, so no matter how much the film emphasizes the problem of women are not allowed to use qi, because of the specificity of gas users, the “women’s issue” that should have been discussed has become the topic of “The survival situation of gifted people”, as the issue of whether Mulan should show her superpowers as a talent instead of the issue of whether women should show themselves. There are many other stereotypes like these, but the ultimate difference between Chinese and Western understanding is in the starting point of the film, that is, Mulan’s motivation to join the army on behalf of her father.

From the perspective of Chinese culture, the original legend of Mulan film tells the story of a woman who joins the army on behalf of her father, and Chinese people appreciate Mulan because of her devotion to family and her loyalty to the country. In the live-action version of the Disney remake of Mulan, however, the emphasis is on the plot of Mulan facing up to her identity and finding her true self. The point of difference lies in the different pursuits of collectivism and individualism in China and the West. According to Cai and Yuan Meixiu, collectivism is an important factor incorporated into the Chinese spirit, individual interests are associated with group interests and individual pursuits are linked to group pursuits [6]. Individualism, on the other hand, emphasizes that all values are centered on people, and that the individual is an end in itself and has the highest value [7].

With the issue of Mulan going to war on behalf of her father, two questions need to be considered: Does Mulan’s family go to war or not? Who should be sacrificed to the war? In the Chinese value system, since Mulan’s family has no strong males and her father is already old, if she let her father go to war, it is possible that her father would die in the war, and it is a burden for the army to let an old soldier go to war. Once the Mulan family set the precedent of not being conscripted, other families

would follow suit, and it would be very difficult for the country to carry out the conscription work. Moreover, When the country was in trouble, how could the Mulan family not support it? Therefore, even though Mulan's family had difficulties, they still chose to enlist, which was Mulan's family's guarantee for the collective interest of the country. In addition, if an ordinary family loses the father who supports the home, the responsibility of raising children and bearing daily expenses would all be on the mother, which is definitely hard for an ancient Chinese woman to afford. If only one unmarried daughter was lost, it would not too obviously affect the family. Moreover, Mulan's family still had a young brother, so even if Mulan died in the war, she did not have to worry about the future support of her parents. In essence, Mulan's compassion for her parents and her unwillingness to risk her father's life can be seen as a consideration for the collective interests of the family, as she is willing to sacrifice herself to benefit her family.

In the live-action version of Mulan's film, Disney shows the Western motivation for Mulan to join the army on behalf of her father on the ancestral sword of Mulan's family, adding "truth" to the Chinese cultural understanding of "loyalty, bravery and devotion to family", that is, Mulan's psychological need to prove herself and to assert her true self. Mulan's father told her that women cannot have "Qi", and since she was a woman with "Qi", she had to hide her "Qi". Faced with this advice from her father, Mulan was perhaps not satisfied, but as the result of devotion to her family, she did not want to bring trouble to her family and caused controversy because of showing herself. Mulan accepted the advice and the yoke called devotion to family, and hid her ability. For the purpose of loyalty to the country, Mulan also had to accept the rule that women could not be soldiers and conceal her female identity. With these two shackles and her subconscious rebelliousness, Mulan went to the battlefield, she gradually became aware of herself during her military experience and contact with the witches, realizing that she should be herself before her collective responsibility, she should show her ability as a woman. This is the "truth" that Mulan should pursue from the Western perspective, and it is also a demonstration of the individualistic thoughts that are placed in Mulan's body.

This is why, although Disney's live-action Mulan film talks about "loyalty" and "devotion to family" from beginning to end, the audience only feels "true" about it. For the Western perspective, "loyalty" and "devotion to family" are the shackles of Mulan's freedom to show her identity as a woman and her own personal abilities, while "truth" is what Mulan has been pursuing in the film. The film appears to praise the "loyalty" and "filial piety" in Chinese culture, but actually demeaning them. The difference between the Chinese and Western pursuit of individualism and collectivism behind the film is one of the main reasons for Chinese netizens' dissatisfaction with the film.

4. Suggestions

In the selection of directors or screenwriters, the investors ought to try to choose local culture people. In this way, during the pre-design and mid-shooting process of the film, they can minimize or even avoid factors that may cause resentment among the local audience. For example, when Mulan's father is preparing to be a soldier, Mulan's mother says directly to Mulan, "Your father will not come back this time". The dialogue will not appear in Chinese culture background, for Chinese, they will politely and indirectly present their sad emotions, and bless for the opportunity of father will back home luckily. Whatever they do, they will not say "Your father will die on the battlefield" at least.

Be rigorous in the examination of local culture. Avoid designs like "Fujian Tulou" which were used as Chinese elements but do not match the background of the story. "Fujian Tulou" is located in the southeastern coastal area of China [8], while in ancient China, foreign enemies (such as Xiongnu and Zoran) were generally invaded in the northwestern part of China [9], the distance of the two regions almost span half of China's territory, which will cost several months for soldiers to move from one place to another. Besides, the tremendous difference in climate between the two regions cause the soldiers who were recruited in the southeastern coastal area would still need to overcome

the environmental factors, and it would be impossible to train them in a short time to the extent that they could fight against the Roran army. In fact, according to historical records, Mulan's hometown should be in the central plain area of China. Such settings as Fujian Tulou, which are not rigorously researched, on the one hand, they will make the audience feel that the film is inattentive in handling similar details, and on the other hand, they will cause plot contradictions in the film itself.

It is better to choose the local language for the dubbing of cross-cultural films [10]. For example, in the evaluation of the live-action version of Mulan, many viewers pointed out that it was a "very strange thing" to see Asian faces speaking English. A localized language is not only easier to be accepted by local audiences, but also actually more in line with the expectations of global audiences for the character.

5. Conclusion

The different pursuit of collectivism and individualism have influenced the two sides' different understanding of the story of Mulan, especially the discrepancy between the Chinese and the West's understanding of the core plot of the story that Mulan takes her father's place in the army. Thus, Disney sets the core viewpoint of the story as Mulan pursuing herself and proving herself, instead of the traditional Chinese culture's understanding that Mulan made the decision to take her father's place in the army for the sake of her family. In addition, some western expressions in the movie also tend to cause discomfort to Chinese audiences. The live-action Mulan movie is thus not well received in China. The cultural differences between the two countries have caused misunderstandings, and these misunderstandings in turn have caused stereotypes in cultural exchange, thus affecting the evaluation of people in different regions beyond their expectations of each other.

In order to improve the acceptance of cross-cultural film and television works in the local market, film investors can choose local market cultural figures as writers, directors or advisors of film and television works; in the process of pre-preparation and story polishing of cross-cultural film and television works, they should pay more attention to the rigorous examination of local culture and avoid settings that do not match with local culture. In the details of film processing as close to local culture as possible, such as in the film dubbing, film producers can choose the local language.

Taking Mulan movie as an example, this paper profoundly analyzes the situations and causes of misunderstandings and deviations in cross-cultural communication, and gives suggestions to improve the local market acceptance of cross-cultural film and television works, which to a certain extent improves the efficiency of cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural film and television production in future. It further promotes effective communication between different cultures through popular cultural communication.

References

- [1] Zhang, Y. "Cultural Conflict and Cross-cultural Adaptation." *Academics* 10 (2014): 6.
- [2] Vrasidas, Charalambos. "The White Man's Indian: Stereotypes in Film and Beyond." *American Indians* (1997): 9.
- [3] Zu, Xiaomei. "Cross-cultural Communication", Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (2015): 42-44.
- [4] Hu, Wenzhong. "Introduction to Intercultural Communication", Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, (1999): 21-27.
- [5] Barrett, Elizabeth Brooke, "The Qi Connection: A Study in Studying Qi" (2004). *Presidential Scholars Theses* (1990 – 2006): 17.
- [6] Cai, Zhiqiang and Yuan Meixiu. "Examining the Values of Collectivism from the Perspective of the 'Two Combinations' of the Localization of Marxism in China." *Ideological and theoretical education*. 07 (2022): 39-47.
- [7] *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Vol.6*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 1993, 295.

- [8] Chen, Li-Dong. "Architecture and Culture of Hakka Tulou in Western Fujian." *Journal of Wenzhou University: Social Science Edition* (2005).
- [9] Ma, Changshou. *Northern Di and Xiongnu*. Sanlian Bookstore, 1962: 34-39.
- [10] Cardon, Peter W. "Using Films to Learn About the Nature of Cross-Cultural Stereotypes in Intercultural Business Communication Courses." *Business Communication Quarterly* 73.2(2010): 150-165.