

From "Song of Mulan" to the Disney Film Mulan: How to Tell Chinese Story Well

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Abstract: It is an important mission of our time to tell Chinese stories well, especially to present a positive cultural image through classic Chinese stories. Among the Chinese cultural images adapted and created based on traditional Chinese story themes, Mulan is one of the most widely known figures. From the release of the animated film "Mulan" by Disney in 1998 to the premiere of the live-action film "Mulan" in 2020, the artistic image of Mulan continues to be praised by Western society even today. Both the animated and live-action films of Mulan are based on the legendary story of Hua Mulan, a female warrior hero from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in ancient China. However, why did the live-action film seem to face challenges in resonating with Chinese audiences? The narrative of typical Chinese images from a Western perspective has sparked heated discussions among Chinese viewers. This discussion has not only prompted us to reflect on the international narrative dissemination of typical cultural images but also inspired us to consider our sense of responsibility and mission in telling Chinese stories well. Furthermore, it has brought enlightenment regarding the practical significance and methods of telling Chinese stories effectively.

Telling Chinese stories well is not only a requirement of the current international situation but also crucial for enhancing cultural confidence, national self-confidence, and cohesion. Excellent traditional Chinese culture is a rich source of material for Chinese stories and fertile soil and profound foundation for telling them well. Using excellent traditional Chinese culture to tell Chinese stories is the deepest form of soft power, allowing the world to better understand China through vivid stories and enabling China to better integrate into the world. By analyzing the cultural connotations of the image of Mulan and the re-creation of this image in the American live-action film "Mulan," we can gain insight into the full picture of Mulan's classicization in the United States and learn valuable experiences for Chinese cultural symbols to step onto the international stage.

1. The narrative motif of the Chinese legendary story "Mulan"

1.1 The Story of Mulan in Poetry

The legend of Mulan has been widely circulated among the people, with the earliest textual record appearing in "Song of Mulan," a long narrative folk song from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in northern China. It is also a poem from the Yuefu collection, purportedly written

by Mulan herself based on her own experiences.^[1] This poem recounts the story of Mulan dressing as a man to take her father's place in the army, fighting on the battlefield, returning victorious to the court, receiving honors for her achievements, and then declining officialdom to return home. Full of legendary color, the poem enthusiastically praises Mulan's brave and kind qualities, her patriotism, and her fearless spirit. The original text of "Song of Mulan" is as follows:

Alack, alas! Alack, alas! She weaves and sees the shuttle pass. You cannot hear the shuttle, why? Its whir is drowned in her deep sigh. "Oh, what are you thinking about? Will you tell us? Will you speak out?" "I have no worry on my mind, Nor have I grief of any kind.

I read the battle roll last night; The Khan has ordered men to fight. The roll was written in twelve books; My father's name was in twelve nooks. My father has no grown-up son, For elder brother I have none. I'll get a horse of hardy race And serve in my father's place.

She buys a steed at eastern fair, A whip and saddle here and there. She buys a bridle at the south. And metal bit for the horse's mouth. At dawn she leaves her parents by the city wall; At dusk she reaches Yellow River shore. All night she listens for old folk's familiar call, But only hears the Yellow River's roar. At dawn she leaves the Yellow River shore; To mountains Black she goes her way. At night she hears old folk's familiar voice no more, But only on north mountains Tartar horses neighs.

For miles and miles the army march along And cross the mountain barriers as in flight. The northern wind has chilled the watchman's gong, Their coat of mail glistens in wintry light. In ten years they've lost many captains strong, But battle-hardened warriors come back in delight.

Back they have their audience with the Khan in the hall, Honors and gifts are lavished on warriors all. The Khan asks her what she wants as a grace. "A camel fleet to carry me to my native place."

Hearing that she has come, Her parents hurry to meet her at city gate. Her sister rouges her face at home, Her younger brother kills pig and sheep to celebrate. She opens the doors east and west. And sits on her bed for a rest. She doffs her garb wore under fire. And wears again female attire. Before the window she arranges her hair. And in the mirror sees her image fair. Then she comes out to see her former mate, Who stares at her in amazement great: "We have marched together for twelve years, We did not know there was a lass' mid our compeers!"

"Both buck and doe have lilting gait. And both their eyelids palpitate. When side by side two rabbits go, Who can tell the buck from the doe?" (Xu Yuanchong's translation)

1.2 The Story of Mulan in Official History

The official histories contain records of the locations Heishan and Yanran Mountain, which coincide with the place names mentioned in "Song of Mulan," and there are three different accounts of the military campaigns in these regions. In the "Biography of the Ancestors of Wei, Volume 1," it is mentioned that "the imperial carriage headed east, arriving at Heishan "; in the "Biography of Wei, Volume 91," it states that "the imperial carriage took the eastern route, heading towards Heishan ... and then crossed the Yanran Mountain to the north"; similarly, the "Biography of the Northern Dynasties, Volume 86" also records that "the imperial carriage embarked on the eastern route, directed towards Heishan ... and crossed the Yanran Mountain to the north." (In ancient Chinese poetry, Yanran Mountain is often referred to simply as Yanshan).^[2]

Mulan lived in the Northern Wei Dynasty during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, an era of ethnic integration and frequent wars. This battle is the "Battle of the Northern Wei Dynasty against the Rouran" in 429 AD. Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei Dynasty, Tuoba Tao, fought against the Rouran, a nomadic tribe in the north, thirteen times in his life, and this battle was undoubtedly his most glorious moment. To defend against the invasions of the Rouran, he issued an urgent order

to summon the army at night, stipulating that each family must send one male to the front line. However, Hua Mulan's family only had an elderly father and a young brother. Faced with such a dilemma, Hua Mulan resolutely decided to join the army for her father. She participated in this war, which also provides evidence for the authenticity and credibility of the story of Mulan.^[3]

2. The narrative theme of the Disney film "Mulan"

The story of Mulan not only has a long history in China, but also exerts a profound influence in the West. In 1880, the missionary W.A.P. Martin first translated "Song of Mulan" under the title "Mulan, the Maiden Chief: A Chinese Ballad of the Liang Dynasty", introducing this Chinese female hero to the Western world. In the more than one hundred years that followed, dozens of English translations of "Song of Mulan" were produced by Chinese and foreign scholars and translators, gradually bringing the story of Mulan into the mainstream cultural field of the West. The image of Mulan has also become a Chinese cultural symbol that attracts great attention in the West.

As time passed, in the 20th century, film and television works became the main channel for Westerners to learn about Mulan. In 1998, Disney's animated film "Mulan" achieved great success in the Western world, making Mulan a household name with increasing recognition and attention. Besides, Mulan's presence can also be found in dramas, musicals, and literary works, further enhancing her popularity in Western culture. Subsequently, in 2020, Disney released the live-action film "Mulan," providing a new interpretation of the image of the Chinese female hero Mulan.^[4]

2.1 Narrative Theme: Characterization

Disney's live-action film not only alters the character relationships, with Mulan having only one sister who conforms to the typical aesthetic standards of a patriarchal society, while her older sister and younger brother are absent; it also alienates Mulan's national image. Whether it's her makeup, clothing, or the feminism, individual heroism, and surreal "Chi" in her character's core, they all bear a strong Western flavor. What is "Chi"? The film explains, "The Chi pervades the universe and all living things. We are all born with it. But only the most true will connect deeply to their Chi and become a great warrior." Mulan has shown extraordinary "Chi" since childhood, but constrained by the shackles of feudal society, her father says, "Mulan's Chi is strong. But Chi is for warriors, not daughters." She needs to hide her nature. When her father is conscripted into the army, she decides to step forward, disguise herself as a man, and take his place to fight for the country and bring honor to her family. Time and again, she overcomes difficulties with wisdom and courage, saves the Emperor, and becomes a respected general. The Emperor gifts her a sword inscribed with the four virtues of the military and highly praises her, saying, "She has brought honor to her ancestors, to her family, to her village, and to her country. As befits a great warrior."

The film increases the screen time of certain characters, such as Mulan's parents. It begins with the perspective of Mulan's father and boosts his presence, portraying him as a father who yearns to bring honor to his family and strictly adheres to the three virtues of the military. The film also introduces a number of new characters, including a witch with immense Chi who can transform at any moment but desperately seeks recognition for her abilities; a matchmaker with makeup that doesn't conform to the styles of that era in China, who tells Mulan, "You will never bring honor to your family"; Honghui, a comrade-in-arms who grows and faces life-and-death situations alongside Mulan and develops romantic feelings for her; the Phoenix, which guides Mulan when she's lost during her military service and soars high in the sky at every crucial moment when she needs to break through herself, seen as the emissary of their ancestors; General Dongyong, a former comrade of Mulan's father who greatly admires her; and Bori Khan of the Rouran army with smoky eye

makeup, among others. Each of these characters in the film has distinct characteristics, with their emotions and actions reflecting unique personalities and developmental trajectories. However, due to the significant differences between the Mulan image, storyline, and incorporated Western elements in the Disney film and the story of Hua Mulan that is familiar to the Chinese people, there is a considerable disparity in its reception both domestically and internationally.^[5]

2.2 Narrative Theme: Plot

In the Disney version of the story, Mulan disguises herself as a man to join the army. Upon her arrival, she is required to learn military skills and adhere to the Three Virtues of the Military: Loyalty, Bravery, and Truth. She is intimidated by the military order that any act of fraud or concealment will result in her expulsion, yet she lacks the opportunity and courage to confess to the general. While pursuing the enemy alone, she encounters a witch. Due to her concealed true identity, her energy becomes unbalanced, and during their confrontation, Hua Jun, a comrade-in-arms, is killed by the witch. At this moment, Mulan finally understands the true meaning of "Truth" and decides to face herself bravely. This act of self-acceptance brings her back to life, akin to a phoenix rising from the ashes. She discards her armor, lets down her hair, and frees herself from the constraints of gender. She triggers a snow avalanche and seizes the opportunity to rescue people on horseback, displaying extraordinary bravery. Ultimately, her female identity is exposed, leading to her expulsion from the army. Additionally, the film extensively focuses on the plot and details of how Mulan tries her best to hide her true identity as a woman, which significantly differs from the traditional Chinese storyline where a woman disguised as a man overcomes numerous difficulties and grows through her war experiences. However, this narrative approach greatly satisfies the audience's voyeuristic tendencies.

The changes in the storyline reflect the cultural and cognitive differences between China and the West. In Western perception, it is difficult for Mulan to remain undetected as a woman in the army for years. It is only by leaving the army that Mulan awakens her own "chi" and gains the opportunity to showcase her individual abilities, fully embodying feminist awakening, female independence, and feminism. This recognition of her abilities is manifested both in her father's acknowledgment when she returns home, saying "One warrior knows another. You were always there, yet I see you for the first time," and in the sword inscribed with the "Four Virtues" of the army that General Dong Yong gives to her. Originally, there were only Three Virtues, but because of Mulan, it became Four. The fourth virtue is "Filial Piety," representing responsibility to the family.

The narrative technique of the live-action film "Mulan" bears strong Western characteristics, making it more appealing to audiences outside the Chinese film market. Regardless of the narrative perspective and content, the film itself delivers a visually enjoyable experience. However, compared to the legendary story of Mulan, the film's portrayal of her tale is incomplete, and some plots and character settings are even inappropriate. In a sense, the historical authenticity of the story of Mulan is unquestionable. As a cinematic work, while it is permissible to reimagine historical stories, it must be done within the framework of respecting history. The truth of history, especially those that celebrate heroes, should not be arbitrarily distorted for entertainment.

3. The practical significance of telling Chinese stories well

As a classic tale deeply familiar to the Chinese people, the legend of Mulan has been listed in the second batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage. The gains and losses of the American Disney Company's interpretation of the Chinese story of "Mulan" from a cross-cultural perspective provide insightful implications for telling Chinese stories well and promoting the creative

transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

In the context of converged media communication, a vast array of films and television dramas have emerged, and the classic image of Mulan has also been brought to both domestic and international screens in the form of movies and TV series. Apart from the animated film "Mulan" released by Disney in 1998 and the live-action film "Mulan" in 2020, there are also numerous films and TV dramas adapted from the legendary story of Mulan in China (Table 1).

Table 1: Movies and TV dramas adapted from the motif of Mulan's legendary story

serial number	the title	Release date(year)	type	actress
1	Hua Mulan	1964	film	Ling Bo
2	The Hujia and Han Moon	2006	film	Zuo Xiaoqing
3	Hua Mulan	2009	film	Zhao Wei
4	The Heroic Legend of Mulan	1996	TV series	Yang Lijing
5	Hua Mulan	1998	TV series	Yuan Yongyi
6	Hua Mulan	1998	TV series	Chan Miaoying
7	The Legend of Mulan	2013	TV series	Hou Mengyao

In China, despite adaptations by different directors across different eras, film and television dramas have all followed the core narrative theme of Mulan's legendary story, showcasing her kindness, bravery, heroic spirit, and patriotism in defending her country and family.

The 5,000-year cultural history of China has nurtured countless heroic figures with noble spirits and exemplary character, whose stories are worth retelling and inheriting by future generations. So, how should we narrate these Chinese stories to convey the excellent traditional Chinese culture and values embedded within them? When dealing with historical heroes, we should adhere to a correct historical perspective, because regardless of the changing times, heroic figures remain the spiritual landmarks of history, transcending ethnicity. This is respect for classics and, more importantly, respect for history.

How should we tell Chinese stories well in the face of the current situation?

Firstly, a synergy should be formed through diverse storytelling entities. To tell Chinese stories well, it not only requires the efforts of national diplomacy, government publicity, media reports, and social platform dissemination, but also the joint efforts of various enterprises, public figures, and ordinary people. By adopting authentic narrative methods and sincere creative attitudes, they can promote international audiences' understanding of the true customs and culture of China. Therefore, only by combining words with actions, official efforts with grassroots initiatives, individuals with groups, and mass communication with personal dissemination, can we better integrate resources, enhance international communication's influence, credibility, guidance, and appeal. This will enable us to leverage our combined strengths and achieve the effect of $1+1>2$.

Secondly, we should establish a discourse system that bridges China and the world. By narrating authentic, three-dimensional, and comprehensive Chinese stories from both Chinese characteristics and an international perspective, we can build a communication system that connects China with the rest of the world. It is essential to thoroughly study the reception characteristics of different foreign audiences, combining what we want to say with what foreign audiences want to hear, integrating narrative with reasoning, and ensuring that our messages are clear to both ourselves and others. This will enable more Chinese stories to be recognized by international audiences. We should abandon the creative ideologies of utilitarianism and pragmatism, allowing art to return to

art and history to return to history. By telling Chinese stories well with the principle of "appreciating one's own beauty, appreciating the beauty of others, and sharing beauty together," we can foster a healthy international communication environment.

4. Conclusion

The concept of "the world as a commonwealth" has been inherent in traditional Chinese culture since ancient times. Telling Chinese stories well contributes to accelerating the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind. Therefore, telling Chinese stories well in the new era is a matter of far-reaching significance. By comparing the images of Mulan portrayed by China and the United States, it can be seen that while there are commonalities in the narrative content when depicting the same historical figure, there are significant differences in the spiritual core and cultural expression. These differences and the ongoing discussions they generate undoubtedly promote our thinking and facilitate international cultural exchange. Cultural brands serve as a national calling card, which reminds us that we must make greater efforts in building our own local cultural brands. This requires the concerted efforts of groups and individuals at all levels of society to achieve tangible results.

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