Disney’s *Mulan*: A Misrepresentation of Chinese culture and *The Ballad of Mulan*

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Introduction

Disney is a global empire that has influenced multiple generations around the world. However, some of those influences are misrepresented and oftentimes offensive to another’s culture. Mulan’s release in 1998 caused a stir in Chinese culture because of the inaccuracy that was used to represent the famous and beloved The Ballad of Mulan that has been around for centuries. The Chinese culture characterized in the movie came to embody a Chinese flavor rather than an accurate historical account (Tang, 2008). Disney took away the soul (Cheng, 2011) of the ballad and construed its meaning to the extent where it became offensive.

Literature Review

Tang (2008) examines Disney’s Mulan as a globalized product that does not actually represent China and its culture. Mulan instead represents western culture and is meant to appeal to global audiences. Tang (2008) gives examples when Mulan actually offends the Chinese culture, for instance when the Mulan’s grandmother, who does not act or say things that are expected of an elder. Tang (2008) discusses the retranslation of the Chinese subtitles that are closer to understanding the Chinese culture and even includes a small-scale survey of post-graduate students and what they thought about the movie.

The students were familiar with the original Mulan tale. 60% of the students (Tang, 2008) enjoyed the film and related to at least two of the characters. However, a few of the students were uncomfortable when asked about Mulan’s image, specifically referencing “the scene depicting young women and Mulan outside the matchmaker’s…”
because the white makeup reminded them of Japanese geishas” (p.156). Tang’s (2008) survey of students also found that subtitling is preferred over “dubbing” because it sounds “less artificial and ‘unpleasant’” (Tang, 2008 p. 155). Tang (2008) discusses the industry’s globalized practice of sub-titles not staying true to the movie but instead to its culture. This is done because of government regulations or to make the movie more popular and relative within that culture.

Jing Yin’s (2011) case study assessed the extent to which the United States imposes its imagery of non-western culture through the movie Mulan. Yin (2011) uses discrepancies the original Chinese poem of Mulan and compares it to Disney’s version. Disney reinforced racial stigmas and ideologies using Chinese culture (Yin, 2011). The Chinese story of Mulan was “decontextualized, deracinated, and displaced,” according to Yin (2011 p. 70). Yin repeatedly claims that Disney’s Mulan robs the original Mulan of “oriental despotism,” (Yin, 2011) and completely strayed from its original meaning. In the original ballad, Mulan had no trouble being a daughter, instead she was a dutiful daughter and had no internal conflict as to what she should do (Yin, 2011).

Collective feminism is essentially what the The Ballad of Mulan embodied, not the individualist emphasis imposed by Disney (Yin, 2011). In the only Chinese film by Disney, the culture was completely ignored (Yin, 2011). Disney failed to understand that Chinese culture is collective in its relationships and everyone is interconnected. Instead, Disney focused on individuality and misrepresented something that “has been cherished by Chinese people for more than a thousand years” (Yin, 2011, p. 71).

Cheng (2007) thoroughly analyses the differences between The Ballad of Mulan and Disney’s 1998 Mulan and its 2005 sequel Mulan 2. In recent years, Disney has been
the critical focus of many scholars due to its rising popularity in representing years old fairy tales and just what those representations mean to western culture (Cheng, 2011). Three major themes are always dominant in Disney films; “love and romance, marriage and family, and lessons and morality” (Cheng, 2011 p.125). However it is also argued that race, class gender, and sexuality are frequently communicated as well (Cheng, 2011). In Mulan, there is certainly a racial stereotype about Chinese people that is not accurate. Children, Disney’s main target audience, are not always aware of such stereotypes, misrepresentations, or distortions of other cultures and their people (Cheng, 2011).

The disparity between each story is far and wide. In the ballad, Mulan does not have a love story and is “not driven by a need for romance in the root of Chinese culture” (Cheng, 2011 p. 130), as is portrayed in the Disney version. In the film, Mulan is no different than the other princess stories. She is just another girl in search of her prince charming and eventually fairs no different outcome than becoming a housewife, despite also being brave and daring while fighting a war (Cheng, 2011). Disney’s Mulan strays so far from the original Chinese story, it has become controversial (Cheng, 2011). Although, accurately portraying history is difficult, Disney destroyed the “heart and soul” (Cheng, 2011 p. 138) of Mulan and was insensitive to the Chinese culture as a whole.

Conclusion

Mulan caused a lot of controversy due to its lack of accuracy in representing Chinese culture. The motives between the film and the ballad differed, Disney portrayed an individualistic Mulan rather than collective, like the Mulan, in The Ballad of Mulan who goes to war because of her family rather than to prove herself (Yin, 2011). When the
grandmother said, “Sign me up for the next war!” when Mulan’s handsome beau came home, was offensive to all three authors. For an elder in the family to make such light of war was appalling (Tang, 2008). The authors also mentioned Mulan’s song “Reflection” as an example of how Mulan’s meaning and motive for joining the war in place of her father, differs from The Ballad of Mulan. All three articles touched on very similar points and equally seemed to be offended by Disney’s insensitivity to the accuracy of Chinese culture and it’s Ballad of Mulan. However, Tang is the only one who understands the need to offend in order to make Mulan a hero. The exaggeration of China’s sexism and the misconstrued Ballad was purposeful (Tang, 2008) to create a popular film in Western culture.
References

