

How Cross-Cultural Films Develop The International Market -- Take The Exotic Reconstruction of Disney's Live-Action Film *Mulan* as an Example

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Abstract: Under the influence of globalization, more and more transnational film companies like Disney are pursuing higher development of cross-cultural film to follow the trend, with a hope to obtain higher commercial value. By taking Disney's live action movie -- *Mulan* as an example, this paper investigates factors of its low box office through a cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, to explore the popularity of *Mulan* and why Chinese natives don't hold very positive reviews toward *Mulan*, we use both first-hand information and literature research method, collecting valuable and relevant information from the public and website to analyze, which eventually leads to the results: it is the deviation in understanding traditional Chinese culture and the non-localized marketing strategy that result in the failing of international market. Based on the reasons analyzed, the suggestions to alleviate the problems are discussed: As the typical representative, Disney can conduct more research on the target through way such as hiring local professional people as managers and let the products localize completely by providing native language and else. Moreover, the mean of training international marketing talents is also proposed based on the profound valuation. These findings can provide inspirations for the future development of the whole film industry, not only for the Disney company.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With unparalleled developments of movie industries, watching movies is not only a way of recreation, but also regard as a medium of transmitting traditional culture, social awareness and values, exerting a huge impact on current people's mindsets. As a world renown companies, the box office of its movies industries even account for a large proportion of global box-office, with 33 percent in 2019. However, among loads of films, its cross-cultural films have long been critically acclaimed, promoting international cultural dissemination and obtaining enormous profits. Interestingly, this year's newly launched *MuLan*, which is one of the most popular IP with background of Chinese element, receive a blow in global market (only \$69,965,374) [1]. compared to Disney's other cross-cultural box-office hits, it is worth analyzing why this big-budget film suffered a box office failure. Is it because of insufficient propaganda strategy, inappropriate images of *MuLan*, shallow understanding of Chinese culture, epidemic interference or other factors? Through the analysis of this failure, it is possible to explore that how to make strategy of cross-national movies in order to maximize the benefits and acquire optimal results.

1.2 Literature Review

It is clear that different scholars have different understandings of the image of Hua Mulan. Xu said that in ancient Chinese narrative poetry, the local Mulan is a woman who loves her family, loves beauty, has filial piety, and has courage. When transplanted into American culture, she becomes a heroine who embodies both femininity and masculinity [2]. Yang said that the new version of Mulan is a very typical “Disney princess”: with strong personal will and ambition of life: she is brave to resist and eventually influence others’ will and finally achieve her own ambition. In this movie, the feminism to be expressed is so strong, “it protrudes on the American modern view of traditional ethics and values of Chinese cultural codes behind Mulan, feminism in the 1960s and individual values in Western culture” [3]. Jiao said that in the postmodernist construction of feminism, the live-action version of Mulan focuses too much on the establishment and breaking of forms, making the construction of female subjectivity a pseudo-proposition set in the shadow of male discourse. The Westernism version of Mulan cannot be separated from its ethnic culture and background, making it unable to resonate with different ethnic audiences [4]. Most scholars think that this eclectic adaptation tries to gain the cultural recognition of the Chinese audiences, and also tries to show the East that it understands the East, but it is vague in explaining chi, loyalty, and filial piety, and the leading role turns out to be a white-skinned, yellow-masked Mulan. What’s more, some scholars have devoted their research to studying Disney’s cultural production from a variety of perspectives, such as cultural studies gender studies, politics, education, aesthetics. According to Wellek and Warren, a comparative study is used to study oral literature, folklore, and migration, how and when the folklore reenters into more artistic, literary writing. The comparative study also involves the study of the relationship between two or more pieces of literature. It has appeared from the realization that the literature is no single, but the literature is plural.

Among the research above, most scholars have seen the Western cultural invasion behind the innovation, but only few of them have conducted research through cross-cultural gender perspectives and have observed that Disney has made inappropriate innovations in themes and ideas in shaping the story of Chinese Mulan and the Chinese character of Mulan.

1.3 Research Framework

This passage mainly analyzes why the reconstruction of Disney’s live-action movie Mulan have not gained quite positive reviews by studying the business strategy for the appropriate use of cultural differences. First, it focuses on the trend and prospect of adding Chinese elements to the film industry, providing certain film companies such as Dreamworks Animation SKG, Inc. and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, MGM, which have already tried successfully to tell Chinese stories in movies. Subsequently, we will specifically introduce and analyze the Western imagination of the remodeling of Mulan and the separation of the value of the traditional Chinese character, exposing the cultural invasion behind Disney's creative adaptation of the indigenous Chinese image of Mulan through comparison. Then, the audiences’ acceptance and degree of recognition toward cultural integration is also analyzed, and Chinese as well as Americans’ attitude of Mulan will be a typical example, to bring out the problem of strong influences especially to the profit and the comments of audiences in the original place for the story due to the adaptation of Disney's live-action movie. Finally, the suggestion with the tactics of how the company can improve the adaptation to achieve respectable profit will be introduced, and the valuation of employing the suggestion will also be adopted to predict the value and prospect.

2. Method

2.1 Survey

To start with, in order to get primary data about people’s perspectives about Mulan, we made a bunch of questions about the content of the movie Mulan and the feelings after watching the movie to do a survey on five hundred random female citizens and five hundred random male citizens. We will conduct the same survey on American citizens by posting the survey on social media. We hope we can

get the basic panoramic picture of the amount of people that hold each opinion from the survey, and then make a contrast between the two groups of data, so we will be able to acquire the fundamental structure of the content of our paper. Furthermore, the primary data from our survey will also be used in the results part to analyze the features of the film industry, the preferences of the modern audience, and the problems that Disney films have. In the discussion part we will continue using the primary data from the survey to conclude some solutions for the problems we mentioned in the previous section. In the conclusion section, we will present our prediction about the effects of our solutions. The prediction comes from our calculation by using the data in the survey.

2.2 Literature analysis method

Our group will search for relevant information about our topic by looking through some websites and the industrial reports (secondary data), and we will combine the information with our primary data, our survey, to get further analysis. We can then realize more problems of the Disney film industry caused by differences in culture identities. In this part, we are going to do “brainstorm” in our groups and collect the terms that might be relevant to our topic, and the Google search engine will help us to find the passages and the reports we need. The information we collect will also be used in the result part, as we mentioned before, to analyze the features of the film industry, the preferences of the modern audience, and the problems that Disney films have. In the discussion part, we can gain some opinions that are different from ours to analyze our topic comprehensively. I believe the perspectives from famous professors and journalists will be really helpful to our project. We will not only rely on the results produced by others, but also utilize the opinions to correct the loopholes in our perspectives.

3. Results

3.1 The trend and prospect of adding Chinese elements to the Hollywood film industry

3.1.1 Chinese elements in the Hollywood movies

In recent years, Hollywood blockbusters have been infused with Chinese elements, including Chinese actors, landscape, food and historical culture, making windfall profits for Hollywood. According to the official article of Wanda Cinema Line, the typical Chinese elements frequently adopted by Hollywood in recent years include the Chinese national treasure--giant panda, the Chinese totem--dragon, Chinese martial art--kung fu, Chinese dressing--qipao, Chinese language--mandarin, Chinese food, Chinese art performance--puppet shadow play, Chinese ancient philosophy—keeping the balance of five elements in the world: metal, wood, water, fire and earth, and Chinese outlook on life - fatalism. Such as Kirsten Dunst's eye-catching cheongsam costume in Spider-man, and the use of shadow puppetry in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. An increasing number of Chinese elements are going to be used in Hollywood films with the constant deepening of globalization [5].

3.1.2 Reasons for the increase trend of Chinese elements in the film industry

With the increase trend of Chinese elements in the film industry, there we concluded several reasons for this phenomenon. To start with, is the market potential of China. According to China Movie Market report China expected to reach US\$ 16.5 Billion by 2026 from US\$ 3.4 Billion in 2020, growing at a staggering CAGR of 30.12% from 2020 to 2026 [6].

Second, is the motivation of globalization trend. As the world is moving further toward globalization, different cultures closely interrelate with each other under the simultaneous effects of "fusion" and "mutual difference". Driven by cultural globalization, Hollywood films continue to integrate American culture with others [7].

3.2 The comparison of the image of indigenous Chinese Mulan and the western imagination of Mulan in Disney Live-action movie

3.2.1 General introduction of Chinese and Western remodeling Mulan

(1) The image of indigenous Chinese Mulan

The image of Hua Mulan originated from a rare masterpiece in the history of Chinese poetry- the folk song The Ballad of Mulan of the Northern Dynasties. From Mulan's sigh at the beginning of the poem to the decision of joining the army to replace her father, and finally return in triumph, her psychological changes and actions successfully reflect Chinese traditional pursuits and prospect spirits -- Filial piety, kindness, fortitude, loyalty, etc. Combining the traits of the legendary warrior of the strange woman and the charming daughter, the image of Mulan always inspires the times with its positive spiritual tension when every time the nation is in danger, and it awakens the world and shines with a thrilling splendor.

(2) The western imagination of Mulan in Disney Live-action movie

Mulan is a 2020 American costume war action film, funded and produced by Walt Disney Pictures. The film is a live-action remake of the 1998 animated film of the same name, and its content is adapted from Chinese folklore -- The Ballad of Mulan. To a certain extent, Westerners have reshaped the image of Mulan by adding various Chinese elements, with the theme of "loyalty, courage, truthfulness, and filial piety". Disney wants to tell a Chinese story to the world to attract more audiences interested in cultural differences.

3.2.2 Different meanings of Chi -- "Qi"

In Chinese tradition, Qi is the basic element of all things in the heavens and the earth, which has a flowing characteristic like gas. The life energy or power possessed by human beings and all living things, as well as everything in the universe, are the result of the movement and change of Qi. In the live action movie, Chi is the foundation and the implicit symbol for the theme for Mulan. Her father once said to her, "Your Chi is strong, Mulan. But chi is for warriors, not daughters." Actually, Mulan created by Disney is a character owning chi and eventually knowing how to use chi to be herself. "Qi" in Mulan translates to "life force" and is similar to the Western concept of humorism. It's associated with Chinese traditional "Tai Chi". With a predominantly white production crew, Disney most likely attempted to equate qi to the Force from "Star Wars" as a way to relate to audiences [8]. This 'chi' is obviously a Western interpretation of the mysterious energy or magic rooted in the ancient Oriental martial arts and gathering energy from the body can release power beyond ordinary people [3]. In conclusion, chi in Mulan is more likely to be a kind of gift and spirit for the main character -- Mulan, essentially different from what Chinese traditionally emphasis about the origin and balance of the universe.

3.2.3 Different meanings of Phoenix -- "Fenghuang"

In Chinese tradition, Phoenix, called Fenghuang, the phoenix is a psychic bird in people's minds. It not only represents the "harmony" of natural objects, but also the "harmony" of human society. It is a symbol of peace in the world. The "five colors" of the phoenix are also regarded as the five ethics of "morality, righteousness, etiquette, benevolence, and faith" for harmony and stability in ancient society.

In the Disney live-action movie Mulan, the phoenix always leads Mulan to pursue and continue to achieve her dream and value, guiding her not to give up all the time. However, in the western image, the Phoenix combines the spirit of the undead birds in Western legends, the resurrection of Bennu in Egyptian legends, and the Nirvana concept of Buddhism from India. It is a cultural hodgepodge, not something exists in Chinese culture [9].

3.3 Different essences and themes

In Chinese stories, Mulan is a heroine who is strong and fearless, loyal and filial. She is the embodiment of filial piety in ancient China and an interpretation of intensive patriotism. Nevertheless,

the western remodeling character put most effort to emphasize Mulan's "truth" and "self-recognition" instead of focusing on a kind of Chinese national identity which combines the love for one's family and for the people who share the same culture. Actually, "Both feudalism and defending the country were simplified into the decadent royalist system and the social system of male superiority and female inferiority" [3].

3.4 The audiences' acceptance and degree of recognition toward cultural integration and the problems

Among the films that have achieved good box office performance in the North American film market, there is nothing but American audiences' expectation for the originality and strangeness of foreign language films in content and culture.

American audiences are more willing to accept the foreign culture full of amorous feelings and legendary scenes [9]. Films such as ever nominated *Raise the Red Lantern* (China), *the Little Shoes* (Iran), and the winning movies *A Separation* (Iran), and *Overheard* (Germany) won popularity among American viewers for their exotic and ethnic features. In cross-cultural communication, the audiences' Chinese language proficiency is often low, the dialect does not attract their attention, and the translation process also tends to cause a lack of contextual and background information. In addition, the mediating effect of the degree of understanding of Chinese film content differs among different ethnic groups, with non-Chinese audiences having a greater influence on the degree of expectation and viewing behavior of Chinese films compared to Chinese audiences.

4. Discussions

From the analysis, it is not difficult to find that the main reasons of the Mulan's failure in the international market are the deviation of the understanding of traditional Chinese culture, the non-localized marketing strategy and the misunderstanding of the Chinese market. In response to these problems, some strategies can be formulated.

4.1 Disney can conduct related research on the culture of the target market

Although this decision may cause Disney to invest a considerable amount of funds and time, if the wrong strategy is formulated due to a lack of a full understanding of the target market, the loss it brings in the both economic or brand impact will be more serious. However, the content of the market survey should be comprehensive. Take *Mulan* as an example. Before the film enters the international market, the economic development, geographic location, historical background, population environment, religious beliefs, social environment, customs and habits of their targeted markets should be fully understood. Taking into account the particularity of the film, it conveys a kind of culture, which is a subtle feeling that cannot be expressed by word. Therefore, only doing some market research, such as data collection and field inspections, are inadequate. The better way is to find some people who live in the target market for a long time, preferably local people, and let them cooperate with the original research team [10]. With the support and running-in of dual culture, market research will become more efficient, objective and accurate. Disney should hire local people as counselors or managers. The deviation of the understanding of traditional local culture can further cause the lack of appropriate management, communication with costumers, and supporting services. Take the movie *Mulan* as an example, Disney tried to make a movie for both the American market and the Chinese market. They did put a lot of Chinese elements such as the costumes, the backgrounds, and the choices of characters. Nevertheless, these elements are just basic points of making the movie *Mulan*. Even without considering about the Chinese market, they might still make the same choices about the castings and the settings. The most essential reasons why they cannot capture the Chinese market is that they did not consider about whether the actual content of the movie will be likening by the Chinese watchers or not. A lot of Chinese audiences reflect that they cannot analyze the jokes in the movie, and the ending of the movie is usually considered absurd by Chinese audience. The same problems are also mentioned by audience from Indian and other Asian countries. It seems that Disney company quoted

some “American jokes” in the movie, and most of the people from other countries or even other continents cannot understand the humor. Disney also tried to make “a classical happy ending of Disney princess”, but this time the story is not merely made for Americans. This is the reason why we believe the Disney should hire local people as counselors. The local counselors can conduct the research about the local culture in the most efficient way since themselves are already a part of the culture. They can even provide crucial suggestions for the new plans of the company based on their analysis about their countries’ cultures. They will be able to know what the customers can actually comprehend.

4.2 Let Disney’s products complete the localization

This piece of content is actually very relevant to marketing. Based on sufficient market research and investigation, the company can know the general needs of the target market audience. In response to this, the company can realize product localization and maximization of benefits based on the needs of the main audience and combined with the characteristics of their own products. Take Mulan as an example, China is a major market for these movies. As a result, it is more important to develop Chinese market and understand the needs of Chinese group. Actually, in the original Chinese story, Mulan relied on her ability, determination, and courage to shine on the battlefield, but Disney attribute it to magic. Although this change of plot is in line with the original characteristics of the Disney, it also makes it difficult for many Chinese audiences to accept it. Furthermore, not all the people in China know English really well, the group of audience might also include young Chinese Children, old Chinese people, and even some adults who do not have chance to learn English. In order to complete the localization of the movie (the product), they can make Chinese dub for it to make sure all targeted people can understand and like the movie.

4.3 The training of international marketing talents

Considering that globalization has become a trend, it is necessary to development international markets. However, sometimes in some regions it might be very difficult to find a suitable local person to cooperate and complete accurate market research. Therefore, some companies will dispatch relevant technical personnel to a country with a completely different cultural background to study. During this period, the company provides them with professional cross-cultural communication, language learning, and simulation scenarios training. Thanks to this training, tablets could adapt to the market as soon as possible, and combine the advantages of their own products to solve the problem of cultural differences and maximize the benefits. A foreign person may never know the local culture better than a local counselor, but the person designated by the Disney company direct can communicate with the Disney company better, so the foreign counselor can focus on the points that can actually benefit the projects of the company. Although the project of investing the talents to let them study abroad might cost a lot, the profits after the projects will be unthinkable if the Disney company can understand the different cultures from other continents and other countries well and combine the elements into the “tradition Disney style story”. This is the reason why the Disney should train international marketing talents.

5. Conclusions

In the past two years, Hollywood movies have been injected with Chinese elements many times, but the first film Mulan to be injected with a large amount of Chinese culture has not been satisfactory at the box office. After analyzing the results, it is not difficult to find that there are some deviations in the understanding of Chinese culture, including different understandings and adaptations of Qi, Phoenix, and differences in the themes and expressions of the story itself. Furthermore, in Chinese stories, Mulan is a strong, fearless, loyal and filial heroine. She is the embodiment of filial piety in ancient China and the interpretation of strong patriotism. However, the reinvented figures in the West emphasize more of Mulan's "reality" and "self-identity". In response to these problems, there are some strategies that can be put forward. First, in order to better understand the culture to be applied to the film, a market research team can be established, and local talents can be hired to assist in the research

and further understand the culture. Second, realize the true localization of products. When products enter different markets, the products can be adjusted to different degrees according to the results of market research, so that the products can be quickly accepted by consumers in different countries. Third, cultivate international talents. In order to better localize products, we can send some talents to adapt to the country or environment where the target market is located. By providing different training, talents can grasp the local culture more quickly and understand the consumer needs of the target market.

We write our passage to solve the problems in Disney and other western companies caused by the differences in western and eastern culture and the misunderstanding of the eastern culture. The Disney movie *Mulan* got a great box office in America but did not do well in their main target market--China and other Asian countries. The main reason is that the Disney, an American company, analyzes the eastern culture differently from the native Chinese audiences. This problem is only an epitome of many similar problems in many western companies. The solutions we provided will work out the kind of problems and promote the progress of western-culture-based company like Disney in different regions.

The limitation of our research is that we only got the primary data from our relatively small-scale survey, which includes 500 native Chinese people and 500 Americans on the internet, so the data we have may not be accurate. Moreover, we mainly focused on the opinions of native Chinese people, so our results many do not reflect the ideas of the residents from other Asian countries.

The interview is a new approach that we can adopt later, because this approach allows us to have a more comprehensive understanding of the public's demand and acceptance for the film, so it can help us to achieve better effects.

6. Appendix

Here is the primary data we get from our survey

1. Do you think the casting is appropriate?

China: 79.4% yes 20.6% No

North America: 84.2% yes 15.8% No

2. Do you think the scene conforms to your imagination?

China: 42.8% yes 57.2% no

North America: 67.7% yes 32.3% No

3. Do you feel the humor in the movie?

China: 13.1% yes 86.9% no

North America: 92.7% yes 7.3% no

4. Do you think the ending is reasonable?

China: 7.9% yes 92.1 no

North America: 86% yes 14% no

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