Globalization Matters: When Mulan meets Disney

Yuis Shi
Senior research
December 2013

ABSTRACT
This article focuses on Disney’s 38th animated feature film Mulan (1998), which marks the first time Disney introduced East Asian culture to Western popular culture. Drawing on globalization theories, this study employs audience analysis in conjunction with social and industrial context analysis to advance an understanding of Mulan’s reception in China. I argue that a celebration for cultural appropriation and Western creativity in Mulan promotes media and culture globalization while the intercultural conflicts between patriarchy-individualism, gender hierarchy-romanticism and feudal hierarchy-heroism along with other educational, industrial, and political factors in Chinese society at that time hinders it. In the long term, evidence gathered from Chinese audience’s online reviews reveals the fluidity and dynamic of globalization as critiques shift, ideological struggles are negotiated, and new meanings emerge. It is important to realize that the process of globalization both pushes and drags cultural integration and this paradoxical force continues to shape our view of cross-culture media products. This article seeks to contribute new insights to the analysis of Mulan with indigenous audience responses that have not been explored yet as well as extend the discussion of cross-culture media products into a specific case study to examine both the rewards and challenges in media and culture globalization.

Introduction
Media’s impacts on globalization can be traced back to the invention of telegraph in 1837 and today media are seen as facilitators of globalization, enhancing cultural exchange and flows of diverse information and ideas. Media shape how people think and behave. They are products of culture, which also redefine and reproduce culture. So when globalization takes place at mass media level, it is influencing people’s perception of individuals, societies, cultures and the world. Thomas Friedman, author of the book The World is Flat, regards the significance of media and globalization as “one of those fundamental shifts or inflection points, like Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, the rise of the nation-state, or the Industrial Revolution—each of which, in its day, produced changes in the role of individuals, the role and form of government, the ways business was done and wars were fought, the role of women, the forms religion and art took….“1 In this paper, Disney’s cross-culture film Mulan (1998) is one of such globalized media products that reflect both the rewards and challenges in the globalization of media and culture.

Costing one hundred million, gathering intelligence and efforts from more than 700 artists and animators and spending two years on production, Mulan (1998) is Disney’s thirty-eighth animated feature film that portrays the eighth Disney Princess Mulan. More profoundly, for the first time in Disney’s history, it introduces East Asian culture to Western popular culture and makes an ancient Chinese folk story into a globalized contemporary film. Yet compared to

---

Mulan’s impressive theatre records in the United States and most of the Western countries, a reversely mild reception in its homeland China raises critical scholarly attention.

When a traditional young Chinese girl of the time who was expected to be graceful, silent and demure walks out of the Chinese poetry Mulan Ci and meets Disney’s animation to become bold, outspoken, and independent, this transformation results in a meaningful global flow in the notions of family, gender, and hierarchy from one society to another. Extending existing studies of globalization, and contributing new primary research on Chinese audiences, this paper argues that Mulan reveals the multiple dimensions of globalization and helps us see how globalization unfolds over time in a dialectic process: on the one hand, the globalization process was accelerated in the case of Mulan by the Chinese celebration of cross-cultural flows and Western creativity, but on the other hand it was hindered by a range of educational, social, political and industrial factors in Chinese society of the time, as well as cross-cultural value conflicts such as the tensions between patriarchy-individualism, gender hierarchy-young romanticism and feudal hierarchy-heroism. In the long run, the fluidity and dynamics of globalization continue to shape how Chinese people view and think about Mulan as critiques are changed, ideological struggles are negotiated, and new meanings are invented.

Previous studies on Mulan

From Snow White and Seven Dwarfs (1937) to Aladdin (1992) to Pocahontas (1995) to Mulan (1998), Disney’s adaptation and reproduction of other country’s folktales, legends, and fairy tales are not something new. Early on, Snow White and Seven Dwarfs, Disney’s first full-length animated film, which was adapted from German folktale Little Snow-White, caused scholar’s attention to authorship and appropriation. Zipes argues that Disney contextualizes the original fairy tale of Snow White and injects American ideology and dream to it. Lacroix makes a similar point for Aladdin, a film based on the Arab folktale of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp from One Thousand and One Nights, by pointing out an increasing emphasis on race and sexuality in the construction of the female of color. Disney’s consecutive tendency to innovate, modify, and rewrite the fairy tales and legends borrowed from other cultures in its animated films leads to this research’s initial interests on Mulan.

Prior communication studies on Disney’s Mulan mainly focus on textual analysis of the film and a majority of scholars claim that Disney transforms Mulan’s story to its classical fairy-tale structure without enough respects for the Chinese origins of the story. A line of the research scholars He, Zhang, Hsieh and Matoush and Xu and Tian examine what has been sustained, added, omitted, and aggrandized in Disney’s production. While He claims that the film is closely consistent with the original story and Chinese traditions, the rest of above scholars argue

---

that Disney substitutes important Chinese values and beliefs such as filial piety and loyalty with American’s cultures of feminism and individualism, and they insist that the character in the film fails to exhibit appropriate Chinese behavior, especially for female positions. Similarly, Jing investigates Disney’s appropriation and indicates that Disney reinforces the existing racial and gender ideologies by deprecating Chinese culture.\(^5\)

Additionally, in Dong’s book of *Mulan’s Legend and Legacy in China and the United States*, he traces the trajectory of Mulan’s story from its original appearance in pre-modern Chinese ballad to its alternations in Korean historiography, European picture books, American animated film, and finally back to homeland Chinese television series; through multiple storytelling and retelling, Dong shows that each Mulan – no matter a loyal daughter, a fierce warrior, or a teenaged heroine – represents different social and cultural ideas in particular time and space.\(^6\) More recent study of Mulan notices a shift to the perspective of audience. Interestingly, Tang looks into the relationship between Chinese subtitles in Chinese version of *Mulan* and the reception of the film in China; he argues that personal factors, such as gender, education attainment, and command of English, influence the meanings Chinese audience take away from the translation, which consequently determines the overall reaction to the film.\(^7\) However, the available literature has not conducted any primary research to provide strong enough evidence to show what and how Chinese audience really thinks, affirms, criticizes, or disagrees with when they watch Disney’s *Mulan*. This paper aims to build this bridge and carry out a more comprehensive Chinese audience research.

Audience analysis is one of the most powerful methods in media and film studies. Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model and Jenkins’s reception theory both lay a theoretical foundation for the study of relationships between media production and audience reception.\(^8\) The former states that messages in media production are encoded by producers and then decoded by audiences but what is encoded does not determine what is decoded; Hall further argues that these two processes separately operate within the producer and the audience’s different sets of institutional, social, and political ideas. In a similar concept, the latter reception theory claims that, “[as audience consumes the media, they] fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience.”\(^9\) Previous cross-culture reception studies have shown how diverse ethnic groups can actually read US television exported texts - from *Dallas (1978)* to *The Simpsons (1989)* and *Sex and the City (1998)* - in very different ways and incorporate them into quite different ideologies according to their own cultural preferences and socio-economic contexts.\(^10\) In the example of *Mulan*, we will explore further in later section how people from different

---


\(^9\) Jenkins, “Reception Theory,” 168.

societies adopt different preferred readings of Mulan based on their own educational, social and cultural backgrounds. Since text, context, and audience all play vital roles in shaping our interpretations of media production, a structured audience analysis is necessary for the studies on Mulan. In previous studies of Mulan, the film has been studied from various angles of text and context, but rarely from an audience perspective. In order to fill in this gap, by adopting “[a means] to seek empirical evidence, through historical or ethnographic research, that documents the production and circulation of meaning,”11 this current research is going to investigate Chinese movie blogs and online commentaries and seeks to contribute more genuine evidences on Chinese audience reception of Mulan, which in return will help to testify, assess, and validate the previous studies as well as provide new depth, insights and discoveries to the understanding of Mulan.

Lastly, but also importantly, what is also missing in current papers and works on Mulan is the scrutiny of an overview of Chinese film industry and political stances during the late 1990s. Scholars tended to overlook the alternative possibilities that could have prominent impacts on the reception of film in China, for instance, regulations that decide what was allowed/not allowed to produce and policies on imported foreign films. Given that Mulan was introduced back to China in 1999, almost one year after Disney’s world premiere, and the year of 1999 was a big year in Chinese history – the year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the nation as well as the year right before China’s participation in World Trade Organization (WTO), it is significant to study those industrial and political conditions at current time that could either facilitate or impede the process of globalization. This paper will explore several issues on Mulan from the intersections of industrial and social contexts, namely domestic film market, Lunar New Year stalls, import quota, and Chinese standing battle with Hollywood, so as to offer a new perspective to current studies of Mulan.

Globalization and the media

With the advent of communication technologies and the explosions of cross-border media channels, media exercised a profound impact on globalization and media products such as international news broadcasts, televisions shows, films and music assist and enhance the whole globalization process between countries, societies and cultures. Globalization is a rather complicated term and is being modified among globalization theorists overtime. However, the common concept of globalization emphasizes the world as whole. Wise defines globalization as “a sense of simultaneity and interconnection, that events and decisions made in far-off places can have consequences for your everyday life, and that your everyday life can have consequences for many others a world away.”12 Elaborated on the specificity of globalization, Appadurai proposed in his influential book Modernity Al Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization what he called “five main scapes (short for landscapes) of globalization.”13 He delineates five such dimensions to globalization: people, technology, money, media and idea and further argues that “these different dimensions at times contradict each other and combine in unpredictable ways.”14 As we will later discuss in the case of Mulan, the flow of media and the flow of ideas are not balanced and the disjuncture between one flow and the other causes the turbulence of globalization. In this

---

11 Jenkins, “Reception Theory,” 166.
14 Ibid., 36.
scope of globalization, Tang argues that since Disney positions *Mulan* as a globalized product designed to appeal to a global audience, the narratives needs an extent of modification and homogenization in order to satisfy global tastes.\(^{15}\) If we follow Tang’s train of thought, it is understandable that Disney might choose to downplay certain elements of Chinese culture and add some American or more universal elements that are just substantial enough to maximally suit the diversity of audience all over the world.

The cultural imperialism theories of the 1960’s and 1970’s paved way for cultural globalization perspectives that have predominated media scholarship in later 1990’s. Cultural imperialism in media studies refers to “one nation can dominate and control the economic and cultural values of another through media production in the same way that one nation can invade and colonize another through political and military power.”\(^{16}\) Within this line of argument, theorists focus on one-way model of cultural domination and global flow. In fact, Disney has long been accused of actively spreading ruling ideas from ruling class, especially in capitalist society, through its production and animations.\(^{17}\) In Dorfman and Mattelart’s pioneering work on Disney and cultural imperialism, *How to Read Donald Duck*, they argue that even in children’s literature and comic books, which are supposed to be innocent and pure, Disney is still colonizing readers’ minds by reinforcing and spreading these capitalist values and social issues about capital, gender stereotypes and the exploitation of the third world; as they puts it, “in place of Donald and nephews, we children and grownups will have to get used to reading about our own society, which, to judge from the way it is painted by the writers and panegyrist of our age…It was Disney’s magic…[that] there are always, in human society, characters who resemble those of Disney comics.”\(^{18}\)

Another perspective on globalization is cultural hybridity or hybridization. According to Wang and Yueh-yu Yeh, cultural hybridization is “not merely the mixing, blending and synthesizing of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole;”\(^{19}\) it is rather a process that “cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another.”\(^{20}\) That is to say, hybridization neither believes in globalization as a force of homogenization nor gives prominence to localization as a resistive process opposed to globalization; rather, according to Kraidy, “this perspective advocates an emphasis on processes of mediation that it views as central to cultural globalization.”\(^{21}\) In simple words, it means cultural integration. Examining Mulan from this perspective, scholars such as Wang and Yueh-yu Yeh argue that although globalization and localization may take away certain cultural

---

\(^{15}\) Tang, “A Cross-cultural Perspective on Production and Reception of Disney’s Mulan through Its Chinese Subtitles.”


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 1–2.

distinctiveness from Chinese traditions, the process of hybridization meantime forms new cultural characteristics.\textsuperscript{22}

What is also accompanied by globalization is the concept of resistance to globalization. Resistance to globalization refers to “the gamut of struggles and actions of social groups and individuals in response to the dislocating co-sequences of neoliberal reforms and its effects in the spheres of the economy, politics and identity/culture.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, resistance to globalization emerges as a way of thinking and acting in fear of losing authenticity as certain cultural and social traits being incorporated into the global culture. This resistance to globalization largely explains Chinese audience’ reactions to Mulan and I will return to this idea in more details in the later section.

Other cultural dimensions of globalization that have been discussed among scholars regarding Disney’s production and animation involve cultural deformations and reformations. Xu and Tian argues that through cultural transformation in Disney’s animations, in particular Mulan, the foreign culture is decontextualized, essentialized, and recontextualized by preserving unique culture icons such as the Great Wall and Tiananmen Square meantime domesticate (Americanized) and universalized “through additions of hyper-individualism, romance, feminism and other Western and modern elements.”\textsuperscript{24} They further indicate that by dubbing the film when Mulan is introduced back to China, certain culture elements are restored and regenerated on the linguistic level in Chinese translation, which aims to make the film appear to be more genial, persuasive, and acceptable to Chinese audience.\textsuperscript{25}

Extending the globalization theories from homogenization to hybridity, this research reconsiders the cultural appropriation in Mulan as a bidirectional process; it reveals a shift away from one culture domination towards a more sophisticated analysis and appreciation of astatic and multidimensional flows in the process of globalization, acknowledging the endorsement of cultural integration and the champion of American creativity and imagination as well as the Chinese audience’s resistance to American culture and the challenge from the local education system and the domestic film market. It is essential to note that a hybrid product like Mulan, which yet bears criticisms and problems of deprecating another culture, is especially meaningful for world civilization as a whole. Because coping with the tensions occurring in the co-existence of very different cultures is an inevitable stage in the process of media and culture globalization.

Mulan story and Pedagogy

Before looking at the Chinese reception, the article first wants to trace back to the origin of Mulan’s story which will help us understand what role Mulan plays in Chinese history, society and pedagogy. As we will see, Mulan has been a model for many Chinese children for centuries and today Disney’s reproduction of Mulan becomes a new model and its globalization causes strong impacts on Chinese education. Chinese people’s memory of Mulan is based on Mulan Ci, or The Mulan Ballad, a Chinese poem composed in the fifth or sixth century CE. Ci is a traditional poetic form in Chinese literature, which strictly obeys a base set of certain patterns, in fixed-rhythm and fixed-tone, but with variable line length. The original Mulan story talks about a

\textsuperscript{22} Wang and Yeh, “Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.”


\textsuperscript{24} Xu and Tian, “Cultural Deformations and Reformulations,” 4.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
legendary girl Hua Mulan disguises herself as a man and joins the army in her father’s place to protect her elderly father in feudal China; Mulan devotes hard work with blood, sweat, and tears, helps the army win the war, and finally returns home after ten years. From the beginning of the poem,26

_Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,
Mu-lan weaves, facing the door._

Mulan appears as a silent, diligent, and kind-hearted traditional Chinese girl. The poem follows:

_Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder._

Here Mulan demonstrates her gracefulness, morality and modest manner. _Mulan Ci_ depicts Mulan as a typical female character in feudal China who possesses several most important traditional Chinese virtues, such as filial piety, assiduity, courage, and loyalty and patriotism. As Wang and Yueh-yu Yeh put it, “the story, which features Mulan as a role model, is one of the ten most popular folk tales in China and exemplifies both filial piety and patriotism.”27 Moreover, the tenet of filial piety has held the most important place in Chinese ethics for five thousand years, as the philosophy of Confucius said, “Among all the one hundred good deeds, filial piety comes first.” Yu-wei makes a similar claim in her study of Chinese society that “the Chinese concept holds that everyone must first cultivate his filial piety by practice in order to promote the development of all other virtue.”28 In modern terms, the concept of filial piety means to take care of parents in return for parenting and respect parents' guidance and order without being rebellious; besides these, in feudal China, filial piety also refers to behave in accordance with the parents' wishes, engage in good conduct to bring good name to parents and ancestors as well as uphold brothers among siblings. Therefore, filial piety in ancient China also plays a key theme of patriarchy. Chines image of Mulan is not only a disciplined girl, but also a girl who follows patriarchal role divisions that ensure the gender and family hierarchy. It is especially shown at the beginning of the poem when Mulan has no choice but to sacrifice herself for sake of her father and younger brother, as the following lines tell:

_Father has no grown-up son,
Mu-lan has no elder brother.
I want to buy a saddle and horse,
And serve in the army in Father’s place._

Moreover, when Mulan returns with crown, she further acts her filial and patriarchal behavior by bringing honor to the family and the town, provided as follow:

_When Father and Mother hear Daughter is coming,_
_They go outside the wall to meet her, leaning on each other._
_When Elder Sister hears Younger Sister is coming,_
_She fixes her rouge, facing the door._

When Little Brother hears Elder Sister is coming,
He whets the knife, quick quick, for pig and sheep.

... 
I take off my wartime gown,
And put on my old-time clothes.

Among the majority of families in China, Mulan Ci is considered one of the must-read classical Chinese poetry for children who reach to the age around five. Moreover, in the past decades, it has been adapted to a variety of comic books and was officially included in Chinese textbooks for primary schools. The wide dissemination of Mulan’s story gives rise to the fact that almost all Chinese people regardless of age, gender, region, socioeconomic status or educational attainment are exposed to Mulan’s heroic deeds at an early stage of their life; for the educated group, they are even able to recite the poem. The deep-seated meanings and beliefs of filial piety upon Chinese society, including its family, social and political life, together with the far-reaching Mulan’s story from generations to generations, presumes how the majority of Chinese audience constructs the image of Mulan and interprets the media related to Mulan.

When Disney entered Chinese children’s film industry with an American version of Mulan in 1999, Disney challenged Chinese parents, teachers and elders’ roles of storytellers and become the new institution and pedagogue to teach Mulan’s story for children in America, in Europe, in China and all over the world. Actually, being a figure of children’s teacher is familiar with Disney’s history and is implied by Walt Disney as one of Disney’s big corporate goals: “I think of a child’s mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.”

For decades, from Snow White (1937) to The Lion King (1994) to The Princess and the Frog (2009), Disney’s animation films have long served as a form of cultural pedagogy for children. Disney’s influential role in pedagogy and childhood culture receives increasing scholarly attention, too. In the book The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence, Giroux regards Disney’s animation films as “teaching machines” that aim to teach our children specific roles, values and ideals and help them understand who they are and what the societies are about. In a similar ground, Kutsuzawa argues that “[Disney’s feature-length films] sought to create an ideal child by teaching children what is right and wrong, how boys/men and girls/women should behave and what they should aspire to do.”

In the case of Mulan, when Disney presents an ideal child who is so individualistic, bold and fearless in front of Chinese children’s eyes, it advocates different values from mainstream Chinese family education. The potential that Chinese girls would identify themselves with Mulan and thus, develop excessive personalities and inappropriate gender roles makes many Chinese parents worried. Individualism is not the only ideology underpinning Disney’s ideal child. Young romance is another text inscribed in Disney’s tales, which is another sensitive theme in dominant Chinese childhood culture and usually prohibited from Chinese

early pedagogy. Chinese education holds the dominant belief that it will cause negative impacts on teenagers’ physical and mental development if they get involved in love prior to their true maturity. Contradictorily, Disney’s Mulan tells our children that a girl who escapes from family and gender constraints so as to search for her own destiny can become a heroine and can have a romance with a divined prince. This story blurs the standards and consequences of what considered as rule-breaking actions existing in Chinese pedagogy. Although Mulan brings the global flow of education, this flow can threaten Chinese pedagogy.

In a comment posted to Mulan on December 7, 2008, one Chinese viewer pointed out: “Maybe there would be a day, before our children learn Mulan Ci, they have already known that Mulan has a boyfriend and has little dragon and cricket as her best friends. That is Disney – is that good or bad for our children? It is hard to say.” When the release of Mulan places Disney in the middle of American and Chinese pedagogy, it is more complex than just arguing Disney aids one side of education while deteriorating the other. So in opposite to criticizing Disney, this paper argues that there is nothing wrong with individualism, heroism or young romance; these are just not the most cherished ideas and cultures in Chinese pedagogy for children so an amplification of them in Disney’s product like Mulan evokes national anxieties for how it will form an identity of Americanness in Chinese children. Consequently, the process of globalization - particularly the process of interchanging and integrating different dominant beliefs in child rearing - is intervened by the opposition and resistance to Disney’s role as an educator in Chinese society.

**Chinese film industry in 1990s**

Besides the pedagogical hindrance faced by the production of Mulan, globalization can also be intervened by other unfavorable economic, political and industrial factors. These factors also established the contexts for the mild reception of Mulan of that time. News reports and articles in major publications including The Baltimore Sun, BBC News, and Los Angeles Times briefly mentioned the possible reasons such as ill-timing and the protection of domestic movie industry that may have impacts on the reception of the film. However, these factors have much more to elaborate on.

*Mulan* delayed its release in China until late February of 1999, almost one year after its distribution in the United States. One of the main reasons responsible for the postponement is foreign film import quota in Chinese film industry in late 1990s, a mechanism used by Chinese government to regulate film imports. Generally, there are two types of quota slots for imported films: revenue-sharing slots, which China splits the box office revenue on a set basis with the producing Hollywood studio, and flat-fee slots, which pays off the total amount up-front to the producing studio. While flat-free films often refer to lower-profile films from smaller studios or with more limited releases, almost all Hollywood’s movies enter Chinese market on a revenue-sharing basis. However, the protection of domestic movie industry that may have impacts on the reception of the film.33 However, these factors have much more to elaborate on.

---

sharing basis. From 1994 to 2001, China only allows a maximum of ten foreign movies each year on a revenue-sharing basis. This very low remittance in 1990s, roughly 15% in China as compared to 50% in European markets, makes Mulan’s entry to Chinese film market competitive at the first place.  

During 1990s, the total national box office revenue in China dropped to $173.9 million in 1998 from $290.9 million in 1991, but oppositely, the total box office revenue for Hollywood revenue-sharing films increased to $72.46 million in 1998, which was nearly twice the level of 1995 and 1997 and more than 45% higher than in 1996. Thus, during 1990s, the Chinese government was experiencing a dilemma of both a need to introduce foreign films to attract the Chinese public back to the movie theaters and lift domestic box office revenue from its deep crisis and a fear of Hollywood’s threat to domestic movie industry and the domination of foreign cultures.

Hollywood took a big entry to Chinese film market in mid-1990s when The Fugitive (1994), as the very first imported Hollywood blockbuster during that period of time, began to screen 57 movie theaters in six key Chinese cities in 1994 and grossed around $820,000 in the first ten days, with a total gross of about $3.15 million in China. Hollywood continues this big success in Chinese box office through True Lies and The Lion King in 1994, Toy Story and The Bridges of Madison County in 1995, Twister in 1996 and Jurassic Park in 1997, two of which are Disney’s production. Chinese moviegoers’ enthusiasm for Hollywood reached the peak moment in 1998, the same year as Disney’s distribution of Mulan. In this year, Titanic made its debut in China on 4 April, and immediately swept the nation and earned its top place in box office that year with an incredible total gross of $43.5 million, a figure that is almost five times as that of the second top-grossing movie and occupied about a quarter of the total national box office that year. Moreover, this trend became alarming in 1998 when box office shows that fully seven out of ten top grossing films in yearly China box office are foreign films. As Chinese moviegoers were consuming more Hollywood movies than domestic ones, the government began to fear that domestic film market would be more deeply affected and Chinese audience would become highly susceptible to foreign cultures. Therefore, due to the already shocking weight of foreign movies in Chinese film market in the early 1998, plus Disney’s previous great successes of such animations as Lion King (1994) and Toy Story (1995), trying to shelter domestic movies from foreign domination and protect domestic film market from more severe Hollywood competition, it is unlikely for Chinese government to welcome a position for Disney’s Mulan in 1998. This postponement as a result of Chinese government’s efforts to balance the benefits and threats of Hollywood movies eliminates Chinese audience’s enthusiasm and expectations for the film, which eventually slows down the global flow of Mulan and the different cultures embedded.

In addition to Chinese government’s battle with Hollywood, I will argue that ill time and political conditions in 1999 are also attributed for Mulan’s failure in its homeland market. The release of Mulan in late February 1999 was right after Lunar New Year stalls. Lunar New Year

---

37 Ibid.
38 Xu and Tian, “Cultural Deformations and Reformulations.”
stalls is a tradition in Chinese film market for the celebration of Chinese New Year; it consist of a series of New Year Movies, or what is called “He Sui Pian” in Chinese. It is a period of time that Chinese audience’s demand for theatrical enjoyment reaches its highest point because family reunions, people are on vacation days and children are having winter break. Since Mulan was excluded from the Lunar New Year stalls, it missed the great box office opportunity. And more unluckily, when it was released following Chinese New Year, children and young adults had returned to school. This took away a substantial amount of Mulan’s targeted audience who are often more receptive and likely to embrace Disney’s concept of prince-and-princess animation. Moreover, Chinese people celebrated the 50th anniversary of the foundation of People’s Republic of China in the year of 1999, which largely increased and deepened Chinese people’s sense of patriotism and national pride. Therefore, during that particular period of time, Chinese audience is highly sensitive, inimical, and resistant to any foreign media products that portray China either negatively or against the dominant Chinese social and political ideologies, in which case, is Mulan.

These policies and strategic actions by local industry as well as the government help us begin to realize that globalization is not a smooth and one-way force of extending one particular media product, culture, or society, which then requires interchange and integration on the both ends. Mulan’s entry to Western and Chinese theatres not only symbolizes the global flow of media and culture but also reflects the disruptiveness, tensions and limits in this process due to the concerns of its effects in local political, economic and social spheres. These practices of resistance to the globalization are shaped as part of its dialectical and co-determining process. These social, industrial and political environments of that time laid the important background for Chinese audience’s responses in the following section and will help us better see the complexity of globalization.

**Chinese reception**

*Mulan* was premiered at the Hollywood Bowl on 5 June 1998 and passed the $100 million mark in less than two months at the box office in the United States alone. As Variety reports on 29 June 1998, “Mulan trailed the leader by roughly $8 million on the weekend but closed the gap mid-week when it led the marketplace. Its $37.2 million finish was also impressive, translating into a $12,900 average…outperforming last year’s debut of Hercules.”

*Mulan* continued its success in box office revenue and grossed more than $300 million worldwide, which made it the second-highest grossing family film of the year as well as the seventh-highest grossing film of the year overall. But surprisingly, when *Mulan* returned to its Chinese homeland in 1999, it grossed only $1.3 million, only 1.85% of annual ticket sales, about half of the total gross of *Rush Hour*, another Hollywood movie imported at the same year, and only a quarter of the total gross of the most popular film of that year, *Be There or Be Square*. The *Baltimore Sun* reported on 3 May 1999 that when the movie opened in Beijing in April, at a recent 7 p.m. show at the capital's Dahua Theater, all but about 30 of the more than 400 seats sat empty. Compared with Disney’s previous success in Chinese box office with *Lion King* in

---

43 “China Box Office - International Box Office.”
44 “Disney Magic Fails ‘Mulan’ in China.”
1994 and Toy Story in 1995, each of which was ranked as the country's highest-grossing Western films at that time, Mulan merely ranked the tenth-highest grossing film in yearly China Box Office report. Chinese audience’s cold reactions can’t pass unnoticed and demand close examination.

This primary audience research was conducted across two major Chinese movie websites, Mtime and Douban. The former is China’s most popular and authoritative source for movie and TV content, including information on trailers, cast, storyline, as well as show times, box office report, and user’s reviews. This site generates more than 4,000,000 visitors per month and is regarded as Chinese version of IMDb. Analogously, the latter is a Chinese SNS website allowing registered users to record information and create content related to popular films, books, and music. It holds more than 53 million registered users and is particularly dedicated to an online movie community among the youth that provides insightful commentaries, blogs, and ratings on worldwide films. Both of the sites become important tools for research process and serve as valid and reliable evidences attributed to their genuineness of resource and a wide range of popularity. Sixty user’s reviews on Mulan from Mtime and 56 from Douban, during a period ranging from 2004 to 2013, have been reviewed for this study. These contemporary reviews not only provide possible explanations for Mulan’s failure in Chinese film market at that time but also reveal that globalization can be seen as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Mulan left the screen but the impacts are sustaining and changing. Chinese viewers have been talking about this film five years, ten years following its 1999 release and until today. Over this long term, their perceptions of Mulan got widely shifted, reconfigured, or remained, a process that makes media and culture globalization more fruitful and meaningful.

Three main controversies between patriarchy-individualism, gender hierarchy-young romanticism and feudal hierarchy-heroism have been raised among Chinese viewers’ common feedbacks. They represent the main ideological conflicts between American and Chinese society in the process of globalization. Firstly, a number of viewers agreed that Disney distorts the most fundamental reason why Mulan decides to join the army. Rather than depicting a girl who disguises herself to fight in a war so that she could protect her elderly father, Disney rewrites the tale of a girl who fails the blind date and decides to join the army to discover herself, realize self-values and pursue individual dreams. One viewer said, “The American version of Mulan shapes an image of a young girl who runs away from the constraint and tries to find her own fate, a plot that has obvious Disney style.” In a similar response, another review wrote, “Mulan is supposed to be a traditional Chinese female – filial, introverted, tough – who has to put on armor for her weak and old father. But Disney has made her a liberal and audacious modern woman who does this all for her own interests and values. It’s totally unacceptable for me.” By making a reference to a line spoken by Mulan to herself in the film - “Maybe I didn’t go for my father. Maybe what I really want was to prove I could do thing right. So when I looked in the mirror, I’d see someone worthwhile,” several viewers interpreted that at this moment Mulan suddenly feels that her value and ideal can by achieved by fighting on the battlefields and defending the nation. Moreover, another viewer pointed out: “Actually, if you take off the coat of Chinese elements, the core is still a classic Disney routine – a story about how a young character who is not admitted in life, through challenges to the social norms, finally gets all people’s

45 “China Box Office - International Box Office.”
acceptance.”

This appropriation in *Mulan*, which is away from Chinese culture’s standard of filial piety and patriarchy but towards American culture’s advocacy of self-fulfillment, works as a concentrated reflection of American individualism, calling out strong negative reactions in many audiences.

Secondly, Disney’s typical illustration of heroism in its fairy tale was viewed unfavorably by many of the Chinese audience. Most of the critiques derived from an earlier scene when Mulan defeats the army of Xiongnu on her own and a later one when Mulan saves the emperor’s life in the imperial palace. To many Chinese audiences, it is so miraculous that a young girl could make all of these happen. One viewer addressed that “when Mulan is labeled by Disney, she is an American heroine. Just like how most of Hollywood blockbusters advocate individual heroism, Mulan uses only her own power to accomplish a whole country’s mission. Through this, we can understand that though it is a Chinese story, it doesn’t come out in Chinese way of thinking.”

Actually, Disney’s heroism is still deeply rooted in American dominant belief of individualism. “Disney again uses heroism to lead the whole storyline and emphasizes on Mulan’s courage and wit”, said another viewer, “but it’s somehow too individualistic; one person is not enough to overturn a war.” Since the dominant ideological orientation among the Chinese people is that unity is strength, many viewers were offended by the notion that one person could make a difference between the victory and the defeat, thus Mulan’s continuous appearance as a heroine and a savior tended to make Chinese audiences uncomfortable.

A large number of the audiences discussed that there is no such a more subversive and astonishing scene as the one Mulan hugs the emperor in front of the whole nation. This critical moment between Mulan and the emperor severely challenges and even overturns many aspects of Chinese dominant ideologies, including patriarchy, female stereotypes, emperor-subject relationship, and gender hierarchy. Many of the viewers expressed that Disney definitely betrays Chinese culture and is hardly to understand. A few excerpts as provided:

> I was stunned when I saw Mulan and the emperor hold each other. Just think, even now in China, which ordinary civilian is dare to embrace the supreme leader? Then moreover, how could it happen in the ancient feudal society? It may seem like it might occur between a great warrior and the emperor, but Mulan... is a female...”

> When Mulan went to embrace the emperor recklessly like hugging her father, I felt totally shocked...

> A woman with a completely reversal image of a traditional, graceful, and demure woman occurred in front of so many people, rescued the emperor, and finally embraced the emperor – all of these are hardly to image in ancient China and are scenes that would never happen in Chinese version of Mulan.

Courtiers obey the emperor; women perform proper speech and modest manner; civilian is inferior to the emperor; female is subordinated to male: when Disney intrudes into these deep-

---

52 我不是状元, August 17, 2009, comment on Mulan, http://movie.douban.com/review/2241910/
seated ideologies that most of Chinese people have believed in and conformed to for centuries and breaks them up, Chinese audiences are more likely to feel attacked and mistreated. Some of them commented that Disney is being disrespectful to Chinese culture; more broadly, they said that Americans just don’t fully understand Chinese culture.

Lastly, the promotion of young romance is another key element that many of the Chinese audiences were unfavorable about. As a part of Disney’s Princess series, Mulan remains one of the series’ trademark techniques - young romance. According to Mingwu and Tian, “in [Mulan’s] adventure to seek self-fulfillment and bring honor to her family, though, Mulan finds her ‘Prince Charming’, Captain Li Shang.”55 Several viewers thought that Disney deliberately adds the elements of love and courtship to the relationship between Mulan and Captain Shang. Conversations – for example, the emperor speaks to Shang, “Such a good girl [like Mulan] cannot be found anywhere”56 - sounded a little bit awkward to some Chinese viewers. In one commentary, the viewer indicated, “adding Shang’s role to aid Mulan typically shows Disney’s way that princesses come with princes. And when the film ends with Shang visiting Mulan’s family and Mulan in response asking Shang to stay for dinner, it implies the typical ending of Disney’s princess story: prince and princess are going to live a happily life together ever on.”57 These common responses have shown that it is a happy ending but it is a “Disneyficated” happy ending. Besides, several viewers pointed out that Disney’s Mulan lacks the depictions of the harshness of the war and downplays patriotism and Mulan’s sentimental attachment to her father.

On the other hand, if we can leave aside the problems for right now, many of audience’s reviews also disclose a celebration of the cultural movement and the benefits of globalization, just as one viewer said, “As Chinese, we of course want foreigner filmmakers to truly understand our culture and then produce a product richly rooted in our culture. However, we also need to understand that for such a commercial movie as Mulan, what it pursues is not localization, but globalization instead. So certain extent of changes on the plot is needed for its global success and is tolerant.”58 With this notion of globalization in mind, we can begin to realize that Disney is only a canoe paddling in the sea of globalization. Mulan might be Americanized and Disneyficated on purpose but these adaptions serve for globalization and are shaped by it as well. In any way, Disney made a Chinese folktale go to the globe and attain a worldwide popularity; we can’t deny how meaningful it is for the world civilization.

We found that many of the viewers praised Disney for incorporating a plenty of Chinese elements to make the film look more authentic: “The film is filled with Chinese elements, such as ancestors, abacus, chess, kites, paper fan, dumplings, Lion Dance, calligraphy, Kungfu, as well as The Forbidden City, the Great Wall, and Tiananmen Square, which shows Disney’s efforts to preserve distinctive Chinese cultural traits and historical facts through its adaptation. ”59 Also, some viewers mentioned that in its drawing, Disney incorporates the techniques of Chinese painting; in the soundtrack Disney employs traditional Chinese musical instruments. Disney’s use of imagination and ingenuity was endorsed and favored by many of the Chinese audiences, too. As one of Disney’s most favorite and strongest techniques in animation, the way of creating cute and friendly animals as sidekicks for the hero or heroine becomes a welcome modification for the majority of Chinese audience, as they said, “There is something Chinese filmmakers need

55 Xu and Tian, “Cultural Deformations and Reformulations,” 185.
56 Bancroft and Cook, Mulan.
to learn from Disney: creativity. By adding the character of Mushu and Cri-Kee as Mulan’s companion, it definitely becomes more attractive and appealing to children and young viewers; it also brings the sense of humor and comic relief to old ones.\footnote{Daisy, June 4, 2010, comment on Mulan, http://i.mtime.com/Marjorie/blog/4380630/} It is also worth mention that a group of reviews broke out when \textit{Kung Fu Panda}, another Disney’s product originated in Chinese culture, was released in 2008. Some reviewers put these two films together and discussed how they similarly and/or differently portray Chinese cultures. These reexaminations of Mulan noticed a distinct shift from critiques to acceptance and from resistance to tolerance. They argued that compared to Disney’s later representations of Chinese people and cultures, Mulan actually shows the highest respect for the originality.

As we have seen, the diverse body of reviews demonstrated not only the dialectic with Chinese people vacillating between periods of criticisms and compliments but also the fluidity of globalization with both tensions and opportunities occurring simultaneously. As time goes and the society evolves, these alternating phases of resistance and inclusiveness between one culture and the other and one society and the other both push and pull the process of globalization. More importantly, during the past fifteen years, many of the Chinese audiences already began to open the door for diverse cultures to mix, merge and integrate in the case of \textit{Mulan}. This increasing appreciation of hybridization in one single media product signifies a profound progress towards a more globalized world. In the words of Lu Xun, one of the major Chinese writers of the 20th century, “What is of the nation, what is of the world”; there might be one day Chinese people truly view and appreciate Disney’s Mulan as a girl representative of both American and Chinese cultures and thus embrace her courage, audacity, and self-reliance. But they are not there yet.

\section*{Conclusion}

Producing a full-length animated film out of a sixty-two-line poem is a never an easy job for Disney. In the making of \textit{Mulan}, Disney’s team began its journey in China as early as 1994 to search for a better and deeper understanding of Chinese cultures and social backgrounds, so as to aid with the selections of themes and creations of characters.\footnote{Sharon Badal, “Mulan’s Journey,” \textit{Film Journal International (Archive: 1996-2000)}, June 1, 1998.} Disney’s efforts to make Mulan as close as possible to its Chinese origin can’t be totally negated; however, some extent of additions, modifications and omissions are inevitable in the confrontation between two very different cultures, depending on the cultural perspectives we choose. We live in a global village and the global flow of cross-culture media products even more facilitates the movement of media, people, economy, education, culture and ideas from borders to borders and makes the globe more contracted. In the case of \textit{Mulan}, we see the production crew travelling to China; we see Disney’s exceptional animation technology being distributed globally; we see Chinese theatres and the Hollywood share revenues; we see people seeing the film in different parts of the world; we also see the interexchange of American and Chinese social, political and educational ideas.

The globalization relies on all the above multiple dimensions and from years to years there is an acceleration-hindrance dialectic continuously playing out in the process. The expansion of modern technologies, the connections and communications between cultures, the more choices of entertainment, and the opportunity for a better view of far-away parts of the world for many of the world’s peoples in the case of \textit{Mulan} promote the media and culture globalization while a clash of the dominant American and Chinese ideologies - particularly between \textit{patriarchy-individualism, gender hierarchy-young romanticism} and \textit{feudal hierarchy-}
**heroism** - hinders it. Moreover, certain pedagogical concerns and social, industrial and political factors also play vital roles in interfering the whole globalization process. I want to emphasize in the end that globalization is neither smooth nor static; it is an ongoing process that both pushes and drags cultural integration. And this paradoxical force continuously affects how the majority of Chinese audience thinks about *Mulan* overtime. From those audience reviews we have seen criticisms and appreciations and resistance and tolerance developing alternately. These ambivalent attitudes are actually what move the globalization forward and keep this process dynamic.

Some new discoveries emerged from this study suggest avenues for future research; for example, future research should examine female’s role in feudal China as compared to that in modern America in order to study how the confrontation between these two concepts can affect *Mulan*’s controversial female position in the film. Also, “Mushu”, as one of the key character in *Mulan*, deserves a better investigation to understand how Disney creates this little dragon to serve for Disney’s traditional purposes without losing Chinese flavor. In addition, *Mulan*’s unpopularity in Chinese film market didn’t stop Disney’s continuous adoption of Chinese culture: *Kung Fu Panda* was released in 2008 and *Kung Fu Panda 2* continued in 2011; *Kung Fu Panda 3* has been scheduled for 2015. The series of *Kung Fu Panda* is one of the most recent big works of Disney that employs Chinese culture as its framework. An interesting comparison analysis between *Mulan* and *Kung Fu Panda* can be conducted to explore, among these years, whether Disney has got more things right in its portrayal of Chinese people and cultures, whether Chinese audience’s reactions to Disney’s cross-culture media product have changed, and whether the dialectical path of globalization has been followed.
Bibliography:


