

The Portrayal of Female Heroes in Movies under Cultural Differences

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Abstract

The female roles in movies are becoming more and more significant. However, the developments of feminism in the Chinese and American film have different focuses due to different cultures. This article selects Hua Mulan as the research object, and compares how Hua Mulan embodies her feminism in two different versions. The study finds that Hua Mulan in China and United States both reflect her loyalty to her country and filial piety to parents. Males are superior to females in both of films. The differences are mainly reflected in the reasons for joining the army, clothing culture, and the contrast between individualism and collectivism.

Keywords

Feminism; Cultural Difference; Movie.

1. Introduction

Feminism was born in the feminist movement in the west. At present, the west has experienced three waves of female liberation. From the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, female had equal power in economics and politics; from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1960s and 1970s, female consciousness gradually awakened and began to criticize androcentrism; in the 1990s postmodern feminism showed up. At each stage, feminism has made progress in its different ways.

2. Literature Review

Feminism in films also has experienced a developmental periods. In the 1950s, in people's eyes, a good female should be a housewife. If she went out, she would become particularly weak. She could easily become a slut and eventually die in tragedy. Even in early time, this mundane view on female has appeared. For example, in *Anna Karenina* created between 1875 to 1877, Anna could not bear the male pressure caused by betraying her husband, and finally chose to commit suicide by lying on the rails.

In modern movies, female is still an object, not a household type, but a sexual object, which is appreciated, made fun of, used, desired, and played with by the opposite sex. In *The Passage of the Sea*, Lianghua wears a Chinese-style cheongsam gown with pink and green borders, which is very charming. The hourglass-shaped high-cut cheongsam worn by Su Sihuang in *The World of Su Sihuang* is sexy and charming, full of erotic hints.

Negative descriptions of individuals or countries or groups in the media may generate negative perceptions in the minds of viewers. Over time, female images in this kind of movies will produce real images to the audience. These images accumulate in the audience's minds for a long time, forming long-lasting impressions and affecting people's construction of social facts.

According to Garcellano (1991), female are often invisible and taciturn in economics, politics, religion, science and technology, but this is not the case in media and advertising. In media and advertising, female are considered highly invisible, but "powerless".

The female images in the film are more gentle, passive, submissive, dependent, comforting, weaker and lazier in need of protection (like a sexual object), while the male images are powerful, capable, aggressive, demanding, independent and successful. They often play roles of tycoons, heroes, playboys.

On the one hand, the media is considered to be a powerful tool that can shape behavior and take advantage of female potentials. Female can use these potentials. On the other hand, the media reinforces existing stereotyped attitudes, expectations and values, which may hinder female progress in our society.

Females are portrayed as two extreme kinds. The females belong to the first group are kind, dignified, submissive, and are willing to sacrifice everything for their families forever; and the females belong to the second group are evil, conspiratorial, destroying the family, and materialism. No matter she is good or bad, female usually dies in one way or another. It seems to be the fact that a female life is more unimportant than a male life.

But in recent years, more and more movies have created a new image for female. Female are endowed with the image of superhero. For example, *Alita: Battle Angel*, which tells the story of a lucky reborn mechanical girl in the apocalypse who bravely struggles to change the world and embarks on a journey to explore the truth.

In the apocalyptic era, the half-human and half-machine physiological structure is not surprising. One day, Alita, who fell in the ruins, was picked up by Dr. Ed. But after waking up, she completely lost her memory and knew nothing about her own life.

Even if she is still ignorant of this world, the blood in her body eventually guides her to become a bounty hunter. Alita's kindness, stubbornness, awakening powerful power, and gradually mastered skills with ease, all of which let such a little girl embark on a path without retreat. In this film, feminism shows itself to the fullest.

Another example is *Wonder Woman*. This story is set in the First World War. Diana, the daughter of Zeus, and Steve Trevor, the captain of US Air Force who went to the battlefield to terminate the outbreak of the German germ war and defeated the Son of Zeus—Ares, God of War. They fought bravely to resolve crises and protected peace. Feminism in the past emphasized more on female, but in *Wonder Woman*, Steve's words "whoever is more powerful will save the world" provides new channels for the development of feminism. The phrase "I am here to save today, you are going to save the world" is not "anti-feminism, but egalitarianism".

These American movies all reveal the light of feminism. For China, there are similar movies, such as *Hua Mulan* with Zhao Wei as its protagonist in 2009. Among the many male-dominated films, this film also has an extremely important meaning for the development of feminism.

This article selects *Mulan* with Liu Yifei as its protagonist played by Disney Company and the other version with Zhao Wei as its protagonist as the objects of survey to study the influence of culture on the creation of female heroes in Chinese and American films.

3. Case Analysis

Hua Mulan, with Liu Yifei as the leading role, is a win-win situation for Hollywood and Chinese audiences. After encountering the Waterloo of the previous live princess movies, Disney urgently needs to rely on *Hua Mulan* to regain its vigor; and China, the world's second largest box office market, is the object to show its kindness. So first of all, the protagonist must be an oriental face. Both Zhao's version and Liu's version are based on the same material, and both of the protagonists are oriental faces. Therefore, this paper picked out the domestic version in 2009 and the American version in 2020, both of which are based on the person, Mulan, to see the influence of culture on the female heroes of the film.

3.1. Introduction to Domestic Hua Mulan

In the Northern Wei Dynasty, there was a little girl named Hua Mulan who lived with her father Huahu. She was influenced by her father to practice martial arts secretly since she was a child.

When Mulan was eighteen years old, the nomadic people started an intrusive war. The military situation was urgent, and all of the families should be conscripted. Mulan couldn't bear her aging father going to the battlefield again, so she persuaded her father to drink too much wine, defied the military order, and quietly joined the army for her father.

When she first entered the barracks, Mulan's superb martial arts attracted the attention of Vice Battalion Commander Wentai. But the identity crisis was approaching Mulan step by step. Wentai and Mulan supported each other and fought with enemies bravely, and were promoted to general. However, Mulan was always avoiding the war. As they got along, the two young people gradually fell in love with each other. When Mao Dun, the leader of the nomadic people, besieged Wei's army, Wentai took the initiative to confess his secret identity to Mao Dun for the sake of his lover and the overall situation.

Then Mulan dismissed the soldiers and followed Wentai's footprints. In order to stop the war, the emperor was determined to make Wentai and Princess Rouran married.

3.2. Introduction to American Hua Mulan

Facing the attack of enemies, Chinese emperor issued a decree requiring each family to send a man to perform military service to resist the northern invaders. As the eldest daughter of a respected soldier, Hua Mulan stood up and enlisted for her sick father. She disguised herself as a man called Huajun. She has gone through various tests, and at the same time she must use her inner strength so that she can take advantage of her true potential. This is an epic journey, transforming Mulan into a respected warrior, and also winning the respect of the country and her proud father.

4. Similarities between Two Different Versions

4.1. Loyalty and Filial Piety

Whether it was *Mulan* played by Zhao or Liu, they both were extremely loyal to the country. In the face of foreign invasion, they all chose to put national interests first in order to save the emperor.

They were also very filial to their parents and served army for their father. Zhao's *Mulan* made medicine for his frail father when she was at home, and devoted herself to take care of her father. Liu's *Mulan* was lively and cute when she was young. With "qi" inside, she was able to fly off the wall, but accidentally broke a phoenix's wing. The neighbors around her blamed her very much. Although her father could not bear to blame Mulan, he was forced to accept his wife's daily nagging and also hoped that Mulan could condense the "qi" in her body and be a peaceful girl, bringing glory to the family. Mulan obediently putted away the "qi" in her body, and did not immediately release the "qi" in her body even on the battlefield. This shows that Mulan is a very filial girl. After rescuing the emperor and receiving the emperor's award to be a knighthood, they both did not accept the award cheerfully. Instead, they retired and returned to the fields, saying goodbye to the emperor and returning home to continue the duty of filial piety to their parents.

They did their utmost to help and support their comrades on the battlefield. In Zhao Wei's version, Mulan cried out because of her wrong decision, causing many innocent comrades to sacrifice. In Liu Yifei's version, Mulan used her wit to trigger an avalanche, and finally rescued

her comrades from danger. Although they were both females, they both won the trust of their comrades by virtue of her bravery, strength, independence, and courage.

4.2. Superior Male Image

to female is a legacy of history and the preservation of war and violence. Strictly speaking, female is relatively weak in physical strength and economic. So in social consciousness, male strength is exaggerated. Thus, female rights in economics and social consciousness is downplayed and denied as well as the value of physiology and fertility, so male are superior to female, and male are strong and female are weak.

The words “male are superior to female” on the one hand reflects the high status of male and the low status of female in feudal society; on the other hand, it reflects the one-sided understanding of the productivity of male and female in the ancient age of brute force, emphasizing the social status of male to meet the needs of male warfare and the consolidation of the regime.

Both versions of *Mulan* are females who are forced to disguise themselves as males to sneak into the barracks and realize their ambitions. Even if they save the emperor in distress, they can't help but worry about being decapitated, and they have to pray for forgiveness from the emperor.

5. Differences in Different Versions

5.1. Reasons for Joining the Army

In *Mulan* played by Liu Yifei, she was sheltered by the ancestors of the Hua family since she was a child, and her ancestors incarnated themselves into the air of phoenix and hid into the body of Mulan. At the request of family's mission “Bring honor to the family”, she was forced to hide “qi” in her body. In addition, in Liu Yifei's version, there was a witch played by Gong Li. This witch added a layer of mystery to the film. This witch strongly pursued feminism, but she had insufficient power and was not understood by ordinary people. She still embarked on the road of resistance, helping the gangsters, Rouran people to invade. She also pinned her hopes on Mulan, and tried her best to encourage Mulan to release “qi” in her body and become the master of her own destiny. This film played by Liu emphasizes to be yourself, the rise of female, the happy ending, personal heroism, feminism, the growth process of girls seeking self, the courage to realize self-worth, find themselves, and realize personal value, all of which show the color of western culture. They have a more modern and autonomous personality, not limited to established rules, pursuing the life they want, being a true self (loyalty and true filial piety). They pursue the process of realizing one's dream and self-transcendence in the heroic self, paying more attention to human nature. American heroes can do everything what is impossible, not only to fight for the interests of the nation and the survival of the country, but also to pursue unremitting freedom, equality, individual liberation and the realization of self-worth. The hero goes through the process of realizing self-worth, and to a certain extent, it has become the epitome of the American dream, and the spiritual connotation of the American dream can be further inherited and promoted with the help of American heroes.

In the *Mulan* played by Zhao, Mulan is an ordinary girl in boudoir who can hold embroidery needles inside and is good at mastering knives and guns when going out. This fully reflects that the image of the protagonist portrayed by Chinese heroism tends to be more ordinary, and the character is more restrained and unassuming, more plain and true, but driven by the plot, the image becomes more full. The Chinese Mulan does not have so-called magical powers, and there are no witches. The whole film more reflects the personal love for the country. Although Mulan has a loved one, for the sake of the stability and unity of the country, she is willing to retreat to the original life. This film is more about female love of giving up their little

self to the big country. Female also have noble feelings that put national interests first. It gives more emphasis on collectivism, national heroism, which can give up feelings during war, and happiness after war. This is typical Chinese-style heroism. They can sacrifice themselves for personal gain. The “self-sacrifice” of loyalty and filial piety is under the traditional Chinese Confucian ethics. The Zhao’s Hua Mulan elevates the love of lovers to the boundless love of the country and the people. Chinese hero has a tragic color of self-sacrifice, and this kind of sacrifice can include family and personal happiness. They are mature and steady, not fooled by fame and fortune, willing to give up the ego. They display the quality of righteousness and fully show up Chinese Confucianism. They preserve the principles of nature and destroy human desires. The purpose of this version is also constantly changing, which is from fighting for the father to fighting for love and finally to fighting for the country.

If Zhao’s *Mulan* is to serve his father, Liu’s *Mulan* is more like rushing to the battlefield to realize her value of life .

5.2. Clothing Differences

As a country that is geographically and culturally opposite to the west, Chinese clothing is correspondingly focused on the pursuit of charm.

The subtle and introverted rhymes, such as cheongsam and Tang suits, are full of exotic styles, whether it is for plot needs or for satisfying the curiosity of western audiences, or for catering to Chinese audiences as a gimmick, Chinese costumes are featured in Hollywood movies.

Chinese clothing has never been absent in film history. Before the new century, in the eyes of westerners at that time, cheongsam was completely the business card of Chinese female, symbolizing femininity and eroticism.

Since entering the new century, Chinese costumes have appeared more and more frequently in Hollywood films. The Chinese costumes of this period are no longer shoddy and inferior in quality, but with exquisite workmanship and diversified styles, which truly convey a kind of Chinese beauty, symbolizing Chinese civilization, and their main characteristics are elegance and simplicity. For example, the elegant Chinese cheongsam appeared in the film *The Woman in the Courtyard*, the elegant Chinese evening dress that Alicia wore when attending the Nobel Prize Ceremony in *Beautiful Mind* , and in *Spider-Man 1* the exquisite and charming red cheongsam worn by the heroine Mary at the World Carnival, Lara’s Chinese-style costume with Chinese embroidery in *Tomb Raider 2*, Uma Thurman and *Kill Bill 1* the simple and distinctive Tang suit worn by David Carral when he appeared, the Qing dynasty female clothing worn by Elizabeth in *Pirates of the Caribbean 3*, the red cheongsam worn by Chinese female in *Rush Hour 3*, and many Qing dynasty elements such as robes, horse jackets, and flower lings in *Kung Fu Panda 1*. In *Resident Evil 5*, Ada Wang wore a red slit cheongsam with modern beauty. In addition, Chinese opera costumes have also frequently appeared in Hollywood films. The appearance of these Chinese costumes not only adds to the appreciation of the film, but also promotes the spread of traditional Chinese civilization. There is a feeling that Hollywood is actively catering to China.

Clothing is a product of society and a method of expressing personal characteristics. As a way of expressing spirit and emotions, the color of clothing has made a certain contribution to the study of the mood of the times. Clothing is also strongly expressive like form, so when studying clothing, it is impossible to accurately understand clothing by excluding colors.

When Liu’s *Mulan* went to the matchmaker’s residence, she wore heavy makeup and was painted with terrifying powder makeup by her mother. She was dressed in a kimono and looked very ugly and weird. When a woman disguised herself as a man, Liu Yifei and the soldier wore the same clothes. During this period, she had been disguising her identity and suppressing the “qi” in her body. During the confrontation with the witch, the witch repeatedly encouraged Hua Mulan to release the “qi” in her body and be herself. In the end, Hua Mulan

chose to be herself, released her power, and killed the enemy with her true strength. Because only when she released the “qi” in her body, she could be the most powerful self. At this moment, Mulan’s military uniform was broken, and her hair was scattered, revealing a bright and eye-catching red suit with curly hair.

Zhao’s *Mulan* had chapped lips during the battle, confronted the corpses of soldiers on the ground after a battle, and returned home twelve years later, in front of the mirror, stroking the fine lines on her face and her hands that were all calluses. She is simple and has no fancy things. There are only three sets of clothes in the film--one set of soldier uniforms, one set of generals, and one set of female clothing. Her hair is dyed yellowish after a long battle outside.

Red represents blessing in China. The use of red in children’s clothing has the meaning of separating it from the surroundings visually so that external bad things cannot harm children, and it has the meaning of protecting children. Gorgeous colors are used in the costumes to prevent the approach of miscellaneous ghosts and to ward off evil spirits. Braiding the children’s hair and putting red cloth on them is to pray for longevity and increase blessings.

It is also a courtesy to wear red clothes on special days, large celebrations and weddings. Most of the clothes worn during marriage are clothes with red as the background and embroidered with dragon patterns and other gorgeous patterns. Older people use black ones, and young people use red ones. As a vibrant color, red means vitality and youth, and it is used to distinguish the color of clothing for the elderly and the young. At the same time, red is also regarded as a status symbol. Arrow-sleeved robe is the most common clothing. People often put on it a stone-blue uniform, and then wear a summer uniform with red velvet on the top of the crown. The stone green uniform and the red of the summer uniform crown show cold and heat respectively, and the two colors match very well. This not only has the effect of contrast between cold and warm, but also the strong irritation of red that makes everyone’s eyes focus on the emperor, highlighting the emperor’s majesty.

The red of the summer uniform is a symbol of power and an important means of expressing identity. Generally speaking, black hoods are mostly used, but senior officials use red. The children’s hood is made of red satin layered, and the area near the cheeks is surrounded by black cloth strips. The rust embroidered on the children’s hood is very delicate and beautiful. It is a hat used by the children of the rich and also represents a kind of identity. Red is a very precious color, and ordinary people can’t use it casually. It represents a noble identity and is worshiped by ordinary people. Generally speaking, the robe is embroidered with dragon patterns, cloud patterns, longevity patterns, landscape treasures, ripples and so on. Deep crimson, also known as blessing, is mostly used for gowns. According to legend, King Fuwenxiang liked deep crimson very much, so people called it Fu Se, and believed that its color could bring luck and happiness. This red dress has the meaning of wishing good luck, symbolizing good fortune.

From this point of view, red has a special meaning in China. In the war years, wearing red is too conspicuous, and such scene will distract the audience and focus on the individual rather than the entire storyline. Liu’s *Mulan* adopts this dress color to highlight the characters themselves, which coincides with the spirit of American individualism.

5.3. Individualism and Collectivism Culture

Zhao’s *Mulan* is a typical kind-hearted and brave traditional Chinese female. It is not Mulan’s efforts that ultimately defeats the Rouran people. It is inseparable from the successors of thousands of soldiers. The very shocking scene in the film is that Rouran people captured Xiaohu, Mulan’s neighbor and many soldiers, enticing Mulan and other soldiers to attack. But Mulan must give up rescuing her former partners, for the benefit of the entire group. This is the typical collectivism.

And Liu's *Mulan* is a typical American girl with a clear complex of resistance. She defeated the invaders and saved all of China with her extraordinary courage and unyielding will and courage. She was recognized and affirmed by the emperor and others and became a hero of all of China. This film highlights the prominent position of *Mulan* in this film with its routine plot and eye-catching visual effects. Since she was a child, *Mulan* has possessed the "qi" that no one else has, and can easily kill the enemy with this advantage.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, the increasing number of "female superheroes", "female warriors", "strong female" and other female screen images are not only an artistic display of the advancement of female in real society, but also a symbol of female pursuit of their own rights and equality. It is a new method of film creation. However, the image knowledge of "female superhero", "woman warrior", and "strong woman" in superhero movies at this stage simply attaches superpowers to female. The characterization of fire fighters is still pale and boring. The traditional female image that has been given makes these female still are the objects of desire, and they cannot fully exercise the same power as male characters in their thoughts and actions. *Black Widow* has both wisdom and bravery, but her appearance is only to balance the incoordination of the male superheroes. *The Phoenix Girl* is powerful enough to wipe out the entire X-male, but this setting is only for meeting the needs of the plot, highlighting the hero's contribution to saving all X-male.

In real life, female no longer regards obedience and weakness as virtues, but more strict secular disciplines have been laid on female bodies and will: such as sexiness has become symbols, and male has more features of female and female has more character of masculine. This kind of phenomenon is common. Such as *Change from Male to Female*, *Change from Female to Male* and *Iron Fist of Shame*. This shows that the development of feminism in the film still has a long way to go.

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