MULAN MEETING HER WATERLOO IN HOMELAND: ANALYSING THE 2020 FILM FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

On 4 September 2020, Disney released a remake of its 1998 hit animation, yet the film Mulan fails to replicate its success in the Chinese market this time, as reflected by its box office and online review. It is unexpected for Mulan to meet her waterloo is her homeland, as the patriotic legend involving cross-dressing has been entrancing and intriguing generations of Chinese people from both ends of the social spectrum via a range of media. Among divergent versions of Mulan narration, the Poem of Mulan composed circa the 5th century is the earliest and most established one, and since it has been in the school textbook for decades, the majority of Chinese people's construal of Mulan is impinged upon by this work. The film Mulan, however, exhibits disparate core values from the Poem of Mulan: the poem features filial piety and loyalty, whereas the film feminism and being true. Furthermore, the film depicts Mulan as a quasi-witch woman with mighty qi that cannot by wielded by females, discrepant from the poem that is void of supernatural demonstrations and interventions, impinged upon by Confucian agnosticism and atheism. Additionally, the film demonstrates historical and cultural details that appear to be counterfactual to Chinese audiences, which is regarded as ignorance and disrespect of Chinese culture.

***Keywords**: Mulan, filial piety, loyalty, feminism, supernatural demonstrations*

I INTRODUCTION

Among China's rich tradition of tales and legends that have been existing for hundreds of years or even millennia, there is a well-known narration that has entranced and intrigued generations of Chinese people, viz. the remarkable adventures of a female soldier Hua Mulan in the military realm. Hua Mulan cross-dresses to replace her elderly father to be conscripted in imperial troops, and after performing heroic deeds in battlefield, she rejects an official position bestowed by the emperor in favour of a family reunion (Zhou 1999, Huang 2000, Luo 2007, Ming 2008). The basic story of Mulan has penetrated both ends of the social spectrum via a wide range of elite and popular genres (Allen 1996, Wu 2011).

Throughout historical periods, Mulan's tale has been portrayed in an array of versions with discrepant emphases and cultural codes, reflecting the multiplicity of identities occurring on multiple layers. The image of Mulan assumes and exhibits personas in divergent versions, impinged upon by prevailing ethos and ethical values at the time of production and redactors' artistic goals and commercial imperatives, and it is subject to readers' projection of individual interests and ideologies. Through extensive elaborations in plot, characterisation and background of distinct versions, critics have propounded a wide diversity of perspectives on the fundamental theme of Mulan's story, ranging from patriotism and filial piety to feminism and maidenly chastity (Feng 2003, Judge 2008: 143-86, Edwards 2010, Kwa and Idema 2010: xiii-xxviii, Yang 2018).

Modern English fantasising and manipulation concerning Mulan embedded in Chinese American culture include Maxine Hong Kingston (Tang Tingting)'s autobiographical novel The Woman Warrior in which Mulan serves as a heroic model, as well as a Disney feature-length animated film in which Mulan is chosen as the first Chinese heroine. The Woman Warrior (1976) illuminates martial exploits, with an emphasis being placed on feminist impulses, explorations of life and psychology of ethnic minorities, as well as the inextricable intertwinement of ethnic identity and female identity (Wong 1988, Allen 1996, Cook 1997, Yuan 2001, Feng 2003, Edwards 2010, Qin 2014). The 1998 Disney animated adaptation emphasises individuality, whereas by means of conflating racial and gender perceptions, the iteration perpetuates orientalised stereotypes that the oriental other is effeminate and irrational (He 1999, Zhang 1999, Feng 2007, Dong 2011: 172-173, Wang 2012, Yin 2014, Dundes and Streiff 2016, Anjirbag 2018, Li 2018, Yang 2018).

On 4 September 2020, Disney released a 2-hour live-action remake of its 1998 hit animation via the streaming service in several markets. Although the film Mulan (henceforward Film) had a gigantic budget of $200 million, it merely obtained modest sums in the United States. Interestingly, the Film also had a disappointing theatrical rollout in China, despite Disney's hope that the Film's story and Chinese star cast would enable a box-office success in China (Kavanagh and Mustafa 2020, Sims 2020, Young

2020). Compared with the animated version of Mulan which had 7.8 out of 10 stars on Douban (a popular Chinese review website for books, films and music), the Film only achieved 4.7. The Film is described as 'General Tso's Chicken', viz. an Americanised mentality of Chinese culture—the criticisms it has received are mainly regarding the ignorance and disrespect of authentic Chinese culture (Barnes and Qin 2020, Elegant 2020, Reuters 2020, Yau 2020). Apart from the mediocre quality that fails to meet expectations of audiences and critics, the fact that due to Covid-19, the film's screening was postponed and/or moved online in several countries also contributes to its lower level of success compared to the 1998 animation (BBC News 2020, Hu 2020).

In this paper, I compare the 2020 film Mulan with the earliest and most established version of the narrative, viz. the anonymous 木兰诗 *Mulan Shi* 'Poem of Mulan' or 'Ballad of Mulan' which was composed during the Northern and Southern dynasties (420-489 AD) and later included in an anthology 乐府诗集 *Yue Fu Shi Ji* 'Collected Works of the Music Bureau' compiled by Guo Maoqian (1041-1099) (Allen 1992: 51, Su 2008, Wang 2017). The prominent status and well-acceptance of Poem of Mulan (henceforward Poem) is reflected by and attributed to the fact that this work has been included in the textbook for secondary education since the Republic period (1912-1949) (Zhao 2019), so the majority of Chinese people's perception of Mulan is profoundly impinged upon by the Poem.

II CORE VALUES: FILIAL PIETY AND LOYALTY VS. FEMINISM AND BEING TRUE

As concretisations of traditional ethos in Chinese patriarchal society, the core values conveyed in the Poem are filial piety reflected by Mulan's acts of joining the army in place of her father and declining imperial honours for a family reunion, as well as loyalty embodied by her patriotic credentials.

The cardinal virtue of filial piety (*孝xiao*) is construed as the fundamental norms and essential pillar of the Confucian ethical system, which serves as the anthropological source of ethically evaluative sentiments of imperial China. Confucian filial piety is role-based and correlated with social identity, encompassing material and emotional aspects of not only parent-child and authority-subordination relationships, but also social structures, ethical requirements and power dynamics (Ho 1986, 1994, Hwang 1995, Ikels 2004: 187-191, Larm 2012, Chen 2018, Van Norden 2019, Yeh and Bedford 2019, Bedford and Yeh 2020). Under the palpable Confucian moral codes and precepts, filial piety constructs one's personality and personal identity and one's service-mindedness to their superiors occupying higher positions, whose authority as resource allocators is unconditional and conceptually independent of moral excellence (Yao 1995, Hwang 1999, Wang 2004, Harbsmeier 2015).

Confucianism draws on Early Zhou (1122-221 BC) political philosophy and links filial piety in the family to loyalty (*忠zhong*) in the political realm (Lai 2008: xiii, 24, Chang and Lee 2013: 14, Csikszentmihalyi 2020). Loyalty to the state is defined as public loyalty that is supposed to be ethically informed, even if the performance may involve openly remonstrate with or disobey the lord (Yang 1999: 171, 227, Maria 2017). Nevertheless, if the connotation of loyalty deteriorates into blind submission to the authority of the ruler, it is referred to as private loyalty: after the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), China evolved into a unified empire with a stable political system, so the relationship between the sovereign and ministers became analogous to a master-servant one (Liu 1982, Hwang 1999, Van Norden 2007). Apart from being perceived as dutifulness to social peers and superiors, loyalty entails conscientiousness to one's social duties (Ivanhoe 2008), as well as treating people honestly and adjudicating cases fairly (Goldin 2008, Sung 2018).

In addition to replacing her elderly father to be conscripted and declining an official post in order to accompany her parents, Mulan's identity as a filial daughter is also inextricably intertwined with the family separation and reunion which are depicted in detail in the Poem: the majority of lines (48 out of 62) are dedicated to portraying Mulan's impending departure and homesickness, her parents' disquietude and a touching reunion with kith and kin (Edwards 2010).

The Poem reveals that Mulan's attributes of loyalty, bravery and righteousness are inextricably intertwined with her filial piety (Li 2008), and Mulan's fundamental motivation for joining the military is her overarching preoccupation to defend the country and protect her father, rather than feminism. It is noteworthy that feminism in this context denotes Western feminism in a sense of pursuing political, economic and legal equality, and in terms of women's growing autonomy and judgement of success according to values they impose on society (LeGates 2001: 6). The cross-dressing act in the Poem by no means indicates an enthusiasm to forge new social roles for women; instead, it renders the narration entertaining, because readers are titillated and intrigued by the feasibility of Mulan's life among men in

the army. Moreover, the transgression of gender norms amplifies the magnitude of Mulan's devotion and determination, as it implies extreme physical and moral danger. Mulan's assumption of a male-gendered military role was not interpreted as being anti-patriarchal or revolutionary until the 20th century, but even in the 20th century, Mulan's deed is still constrained by a preoccupation with the link between the imperial country and its subjects (Edwards 1995, 2010, Lau 2020).

The Film, however, emphasises being true, which is reflected by the fact that 'true' serves as one of three creeds 'loyal, brave and true' engraved on Mulan's sword, and the fact that 'being true' has been reiterated throughout the Film. According to the witch Xianniang, Mulan should be herself, instead of disguising herself as 'Hua Jun', because not being true poisons her *chi* (Example (1)). After being defeated by Xianniang, Mulan sees the phoenix and decides to be true (Example (2)), by removing her armour and letting down her hair.

(1) Liar. Your deceit weakens you. It poisons your *chi*…Then you will die pretending to be something you're not. (1:02:18-1:03:20)

(2) Hua Jun did die, for a lie can only live so long. But Mulan. Mulan lived. (1:03:46-1:03:56)

III (IN)SUPERNATURALNESS: WEAVING AND MAKEUP VS. QI AND WITCHCRAFT

The vast majority of mythological and legendary narratives in traditional Chinese folk literature are featured by supernatural demonstrations and interventions, represented by the Four Great Folktales: 1) Meng Jiang Nv who annihilates the Great Wall with her tears for grief at her husband's decease; 2) Bai Suzhen who is a white snake transformed into a woman through Taoist magical arts and marries an immortal; 3) Zhu Yingtai who turned into butterflies with her thwarted beloved after death; and 4) the goddess Zhinv who is expatriated from her immortal husband and only has an annual reunion over the Milky Way through a bridge formed by a flock of magpies (Tuohy 1991, Tan 1993, Lee 2005, 2008, Roland 2005, Brown and Brown 2006: 72-75, Idema 2008, 2012, Lin 2009).

In sharp contrast with the above-mentioned folklore heroines, Mulan's quotidian narration is void of divine elements or superpower. As a work eulogising filial piety and loyalty, the Poem is comprehensively impinged upon by zeitgeist Confucian ideology, the cardinal ideational scheme of which is featured by agnosticism and atheism. The Confucian focus of ritual and sacrifice is placed on natural forces or historical sages through inculcating ethical values and social criticality into humanity, rather than expression of dependence on the supernatural (Cohen 1992). Consequently, annunciations oppugning the existence of divinities abound with The Analects, e.g. **子不**语怪力乱神 *Zi bu yu guai li luan shen* 'The subjects on which the Master does not talk are strange powers and irrational deities', **未知生**, **焉知死** *Wei zhi sheng, yan zhi si* 'If we even don't understand life, how could we know anything about death', and **敬鬼神而**远之, **可**谓知矣 *Jing gui shen er yuan zhi, ke wei zhi yi* 'The wisest thing one could do is to keep a respectful distance from spirits and ghosts' (Li 2008: 247, Rosker 2019: 142, Author 2020).

Therefore, the sustained popularity of Mulan in the Poem is exactly attributed to the fact that her legend is regarding an ordinary mortal's adventure by simply deviating from conventional gender norms, which renders the transformation compelling and revolutionary (Kwa and Idema 2010: xi).

In the Poem, Mulan is an ordinary young woman who does domestic chores such as weaving (Example (3)). It is worth mentioning that the household duty of weaving was typically linked to the conventional role of women as indispensable contributors to the grain-based, self-sufficient, and labour-intensive agricultural economy (Wang 2000: 58). Additionally, '[c]ommoners produced the basic material goods necessary for human life, and within this sphere weaving was the female counterpart of tilling the soil. The elite worked with culture, wen, and within this sphere embroidery was a female counterpart of writing' (Bray 2013: 116).

(3) 唧唧复唧唧, **木**兰当户织。

Ji ji fu ji ji, mulan dang hu zhi.

'A sigh, a sigh, and then again a sigh—Mulan was sitting at the door and weaving.' (Kwa and Idema 2010: 1)

Furthermore, Mulan's boundary-transgressive behaviours are temporary, and her proper place is home where she can assume the proper gender identity (Allen 1996). Therefore, as soon as Mulan returns to her hometown, she ceases cross-dressing and puts her old clothes back on, and she also

dresses herself up by putting on makeup and doing the hair (4), which is the embodiment of stereotypical female mindset and norms.

(4) **开我**东阁门,**坐我西**阁床。脱我战时袍,**著我旧**时裳。当窗理云鬓,对镜帖花黄。

Kai wo dong ge men, zuo wo xi ge chuang. Tuo wo zhan shi pao, zhuo wo jiu shi chang. Dang chuang li yun bin, dui jing tie hua huang.

"Open the gate to my pavilion on the east, Let me sit down in my old western room. I will take off the dress I wore in battle; I will put on the skirt I used to wear." Close to the window she did up her hair; Facing the mirror she applied makeup.' (Kwa and Idema 2010: 2)

Nonetheless, in the Film, Mulan is depicted as an energetic young woman who 'flits around rooftops chasing chickens', as opposed to a lady who faces the mirror applying makeup in the Poem. More significantly, she has *chi*, 'the boundless energy of life itself' that only 'a son can wield'.

As one of the most fundamental conceptions of Chinese thought, *chi*, or *qi* 气'vital energy', denotes 'spiritual matter' that connotes the substance of life, and its conceptualisation in Daoism and Confucianism can be pursued in a context of spiritualism: a spiritualistic world view ascribes all things in the universe to *qi* (Ogura 2018). *Qi* covers fields of philosophy, religion, literature, calligraphy, painting, music, martial arts and medicine, and penetrates everyday vernacular (Ames and Hall 2001: 22, Kim 2015: 7, 12-13). Since the Spring and Autumn period (circa 770-476 BC), *qi*, as psychophysical energy, has been assumed to consist of *yin* (阴the receptive force) and *yang* (阳the active force), which are two opposing yet simultaneously complementary primordial energy constituting everything in the universe—visible and invisible, with and without form, living and nonliving, material and ideal, etc. The innovatively harmonising operations of the two modalities of the psychophysical energy *qi* is captured by the symbol of the Great Ultimate (**太极***taiji*) illuminating a ceaseless dynamic union of complementary opposites (Hwang 1999, Browne 2007, Wang 2012: 13-14, Lee 2014: 42-45).

In terms of witchcraft, in the Film, it is is depicted to suffer from disdain and disapprobation, which is counterfactual. In ancient China, amuletic, divinatory and alternative magical and ritual practices and practitioners were treated with awe and reverence. For instance, in the Chinese epistemological system of shamanism, shamans (**巫***wu*) embodied a set of beliefs and religious techniques, and they were assumed to be able to cure diseases and exorcise evil as magicians (Harner 1987, Tong 2002); additionally, shamans mediated between Heaven and Earth, the former of which exerted dominion over the latter by imparting essential values, so the shamans were bestowed with supreme authority as representatives of Heaven, and they thus occupied a position of rulership over the Earth (Knecht 2003, Ogura 2018). Moreover, even Zhuge Liang (181-234), who was the celebrated adviser to the founder of the Shu-Han dynasty (221-263) and construed as the incarnation of ultimate intelligence, loyalty and perseverance (Chen 2007, Yan 2011), was believed to possess supernatural powers (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2017).

A specific paradigm can be drawn from 红楼梦*Hong Lou Meng* ('Dream of the Red Chamber' or 'Story of the Stone'), a full-fledged masterpiece composed in the mid-18th century and unanimously acknowledged as the milestone and pinnacle of Chinese literature, which chronicles the travails of an enormous aristocratic clan as well as its prosperity and catastrophic perishment. In Chapter 25, there is an episode depicting non-mainstream, unorthodox religious practices entailing sorcery and abracadabra, which render the protagonist Baoyu and his cousin 'subjected by witchcraft to the assaults of demons' (Hawkes 1973) and trigger their paralysing stupor. The black magic is conducted deviously by an avaricious and malevolent witch who is Baoyu's 'godmother' yet is bribed by his father's concubine to curse him out of animosity and covetousness. As can be seen from Chapter 25 of the novel, the witch is venerated by the upper class, reflected by her close rapport with a range of aristocratic and affluent families.

IV OTHER CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL DETAILS

Apart from core values and supernatural elements, there are other details in the Film that are in defiance of Chinese culture and history.

4.1 *FENGHUANG* AND REINCARNATION

In the Film, Mulan is told by her father that 'the phoenix is consumed by flame and emerges again' (0:05:18). Nevertheless, 凤凰 *fenghuang* 'phoenix' in traditional Chinese culture is disparate from the

Egyptian mythological bird phoenix that rejuvenates from ashes with renewed youth to live through another cycle (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2017, Ayto 2020). In Chinese mythology, *fenghuang* denotes an immortal bird whose auspicious rare appearances signify harmony and prosperity while departure boded calamity (Zhang 2010, Cheng 2014, Yin 2015, Helicon 2018). *Fenghuang* initially entails properties of both genders, but in later descriptions it exclusively symbolises the female portion of the *yin-yang* principle and becomes the female counterpart of the long (龙*long*), viz. the Chinese dragon (Chen 2008, Encyclopaedia Britannica 2017, Zhang 2018). The depiction of *fenghuang* first appeared in **山海**经 *Shan Hai Jing* 'Classic of Mountains and Seas', a pre-Qin (prior to 221BC) compilation of mythical geography and animals (Example (5)). As can be seen from (5), *fenghuang* is deemed propitious, as it demonstrates the Confucian virtues of righteousness, propriety, benevolence and faithfulness. It is notable that the original name of *fenghuang* is written as 凤皇 rather than凤凰, and in a reference book 说文解字 *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* complied by Xu Shen (58-147), the name became the latter (Example (6)). In ancient classics, there is lack of record justifying that *fenghuang* can be consumed by flame and reemerge.

(5) **有**鸟焉,**其状如**鸡, **五采而文**, **名曰**凤皇, **首文曰德**, **翼文曰**义, **背文曰礼**, **膺文曰仁**, **腹文曰信。是**鸟也, 饮食自然, **自歌自舞**, 见则天下安宁。

You niao yan, qi zhuang ru ji, wu cai er wen, ming yue feng huang, shou wen yue de, yi wen yue yi, bei wen yue li, ying wen yue ren, fu wen yue xin. Shi niao ye, yin shi zi ran, zi ge zi wu, jian ze tian xia an ning.

'There is a pheasant-like bird with colourful feathers, which is called fenghuang. There are characters on its body: "virtue" on the head, "righteousness" on the wing, "propriety" on the back, "benevolence" on the chest, and "faithfulness" on the stomach. This bird consumes natural food and water and dances and sings on its own; its presence augurs world-wide peace.' (*Shan Hai Jing: Nan Shan Jing*)

(6) 凤, **神**鸟也。...**出于**东方君子之国, **翱翔四海之外**...见则天下大安宁。

Feng, shen niao ye…Chu yu dong fang jun zi zhi guo, ao xiang si hai zhi wai…jian ze tian xia da an ning.

'Feng, the divine bird…It was born in the oriental kingdom of gentlemen and flies beyond four oceans…Its presence augurs grand world-wide peace.'

It is worth mentioning that in Chinese mythology, for instance, as recorded in Shan Hai Jing (7-8), there are indeed birds that are believed to be able to resist fire, yet they are by no means fenghuang.

(7) **曰小**华之山...鸟多赤鷩, **可以御火**。

Yue xiao hua zhi shan…niao duo chi bi, ke yi yu huo.

'There is a mountain called Xiaohua...Most birds there are chibi which can resist fire.' (*Shan Hai Jing: Xi Shan Jing*)

(8) **曰翠山**...**其多**鸓, **其状如**鹊, **赤黑而两首四足**, **可以御火**。

Yue cui shan...Qi duo lei, qi zhuang ru que, chi hei er liang shou si zu, ke yi yu huo.

'There is a mountain called Cui…There are many lei that look like magpies; these black birds have two heads and four feet and can resist fire.' (*Shan Hai Jing: Xi Shan Jing*)

There is no denying the fact that currently in China, *fenghuang* is sometimes wrongly linked to rebirth and reincarnation. This misperception, however, is attributed to a poem entitled 凤凰涅槃 *Fenghuang Niepan* ('Nirvana of the Phoenix') from a poetry collection **女神***Nvshen* 'Goddess' composed by **郭沫若** Guo Moruo (1892-1978), one of the vanguards of modern Chinese poetry, in 1921. Under the background of the literary revolution in early 20th-century China, the height of which is marked by the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Guo's epoch-making collection embodies an all-important evolutionary narrative of a Chinese revolutionary nation building expressed by the New Culturalists. As the most thematically emblematic work that typifies the collection and the spirit of the May Fourth Movement, *Nirvana of the Phoenix* emphatically conveys intellectuals' revolutionary spirit and optimism, as well as their aspirations to regenerate their homeland (He 1983: 442-443, Zhou 1987): its theme ensures that the born-again birds *feng* and *huang* can bring regeneration of the world with

them, and as long as one practices differentiating (from the multitude) self-discipline, transcendence in death can be realised (Chen 2006, Zheng 2012). That is to say, in *Nirvana of the Phoenix*, the image of the Chinese *fenghuang* is impinged upon by the Egyptian phoenix, and *fenghuang's* characteristic concerning regeneration is merely an embodiment of the author's artistic imagination and cultural and political aspirations. Owing to the wide-ranging and profound influence of Guo Moruo and the New Culture Movement, along with China's urgent need for such a positive and optimistic metaphor in the early 20th century, *fenghuang's* representation of regeneration has become established as a novel cultural allusion.

4.2 MATCHMAKING AND FACE

The Film's misrepresentation of Chinese culture can be indicated by an episode regarding a matchmaker. In the Film, after Mulan fails to behave well in front of a matchmaker who is arranging a marriage for her, the matchmaker castigates Mulan in front of a whispering crowd as being '[d]ishonour to the Hua family' and proclaims that her family 'have failed to raise a good daughter'. Nevertheless, I propound that in a Chinese context, such an act of public censure would be hard to accept for Chinese audiences, as it would be regarded as face-threatening. Face conceptualisation is correlated with positively valued social attributes (Goffman 1967), respectability and/or deference (Ho 1976), public self-image (Brown and Levinson 1987), due recognition to other's social status and achievement (Mao 1994), interpersonal identity of individuals in communication (Scollon and Scollon 1995), etc. Saving face entails avoiding or reducing face threats via verbal and behavioural strategies, and face enhancement is a politeness strategy for reducing face threat; face attack and face loss, on the contrary, are associated with failure to engage in face-saving conduct (Culpeper 1996, 2008, 2011, 2012, Bravo 2008). The concept of face in a Chinese context is embedded in the Confucian ethos of shame and social harmony (Fang 1999, Dong and Lee 2007), and it is comprised of two distinguishable criteria, viz. 面子*mianzi* and 脸*lian* (Hu 1944, Haugh 2005, Gao 2009, He and Zhang 2011: 2369, Chang and Haugh 2013). Given the collectivistic cultural background, integrating and non-confrontational styles of interaction as well as obliging and avoidance conflict management approaches are more embraced in China. Consequently, Chinese people are more other-face oriented than their counterparts impinged upon by individualistic cultures who place more emphasis on the self-face (Ting-Toomey 1988, Ting-Toomey et al 1991). When engaged in social interaction, Chinese people adopt face and politeness strategies as social practice to preserve hierarchical order and solidarity (Pan 2000: 149), and they tend to conduct more indirect and other-face concern conflict acts and display avoiding, obliging and passive aggressive facework tactics (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001, Ting-Toomey 2005, 2009, 2012). Therefore, casting aspersions on someone and their family does not comply with the Chinese conceptualisation of face.

Furthermore, in the Film, the matchmaker's preaching about the virtues of being a good wife is counterfactual, in that matchmakers in the feudal society were not expected to assume duties other than arranging marriages (Fang 1997, Wu 1998).

4.3 RESTRICTIONS ON WOMEN AND CONDUCT OF RULERS

The Film's misrepresentation of traditional Chinese culture can be manifested by two examples: aristocratic women are depicted to socialise with their male counterparts, without being restricted by gender segregation; the emperor is depicted to engage in a duel himself, defying the conventional ethos of rulers. Both examples concerning the ruling class contradict with traditional Chinese culture.

To be more specific, one example is that a scene in the Film depicts aristocratic women walking around in the royal palace with sun umbrellas, and in the background male officials can be seen as well. Similarly, towards the end of the Film, when the emperor offers Mulan an official position in the imperial guard, soldiers and some gloriously dressed, aristocrat-like women gather in the same hall.

In the pre-modern patriarchal society, civilised and respectable women were restricted from freedom of movement out of inner chambers, in that according to ethic-religious Confucian precepts, the proper place for women was in the home, where they were obliged to fulfil societal and familial responsibilities of upbringing and educating offspring, so women's travelling, especially unaccompanied one, was deemed improper or illegal (Adler 2006, Li 2015, Liu 2016, Wang 2019). These creeds eventually led to the misogynistic practice of foot binding that originated among the upper class in the Tang dynasty (618-907) and proliferated to most social classes by the Qing era (1644-1912), so as to ensure seclusion that was evaluated as being morally superior to gender mingling (Ebrey 1993: Ko 2001: 32-42, 199, 2005: 1-2, Pitts-Taylor 2008: 200-204). Furthermore, orthodox institutions forbade

sexual or even social contact between two genders, and aristocratic women were forced into isolation from public affairs and communication with non-familial males, thereby preventing damage of female chastity (McMahon 1987, Edwards 1990, Theiss 2004: 13-14). A quintessential embodiment of the patriarchal repression on women was the cult of chastity that had been prevailing since the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368): widows were extolled for committing suicide upon their husbands' decease, and ceremonial arches and shrines were constructed for married and unmarried chastity martyrs who committed suicide to protect their chastity (Waltner 1981, 1996, Mann 2002, Theiss 2002, Smith 2008: 358, Fei 2012).

The other example is that in the Film, the emperor decides to kill the khan with his 'own hands' in a duel, so later he is ambushed and abducted. In China's first military masterpiece 孙子兵法 *Sunzi Bing Fa* 'The Art of War' composed between 400 and 320 BC, which captures the 'essence of wisdom on the conduct of war' (Hart 1963: v, Luo and Zhang 2018, Joshi 2019), the general perspective and attitude towards warfare lie in prudence in waging war (**慎**战*shen zhan*) and victory without battle (**不**战而胜*bu zhan er sheng*). The author Sun Tzu also emphasised the significance of wisdom for a competent military general by stating it as the foremost virtue: 'a general is wise, trustworthy, benevolent, brave and disciplined' (**将者**, **智**, **信**, **仁**, **勇**, 严也 *jiang zhe, zhi, xin, ren, yong, yan ye*) (Li and Young 2017). Therefore, the emperor's duel does not conform to conventional ethos of sagacious rulers, as the most revered ones are adulated for **运筹帷幄之中**, **决**胜千里之外 *yunchou weiwo zhizhong, juesheng qianli zhiwai* 'devising strategies within a command tent to obtain decisive victories thousands of miles away'.

4.4 TULOU, COUPLETS AND RABBITS

In the Film, Mulan's family live in a massive multi-storey house built along an inward-looking, circular floor plan around a central open courtyard with only one entrance, which is called Tulou (**土楼** 'earth building'). Tulou was for defence purposes, housing a whole clan of hundreds of Hakka migrants driven by war and conflicts (UNESCO 2008, Huang and Dai 2009, Zhou and Dong 2015). Significantly, Tulou originated during the Song dynasty (960-1279) and was located in the southeast coastal area, i.e. Fujian and Guangdong provinces (Huang 2003: 221, You 2010, Xinhua 2019). Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that the legend of Mulan occurred in the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534) which was located in north China (Edwards 2010, Kwa and Idema 1010: vii). In the Poem, there is a line indicating that Mulan's home is located hours away by horse from the Yellow River (9), but the Yellow River is at least 1,500 kilometres away from Fujian or Guangdong province, where the Tulou in the Film can be found. That is to say, it is counterfactual for Mulan to live in a Tulou both temporally and geographically.

(9) **旦辞**爷娘去, **暮宿黄河**边。

Dan ci ye niang qu, mu su huang he bian.

'At dawn she said good-bye to her dear parents, At night she rested by the Yellow River.' (Kwa and Idema 2010: 1)

It is noteworthy that a pair of antithetical couplets (对联*duilian*) are attached to the sides of the matchmaker's door. If the Film manages to accord with the correct order to arrange the anterior and posterior lines, namely, from right to left, then the couplet is in (10). As can be seen, Example (10) fails to comply with institutions of couplet composition: 1) the posterior line must not reuse characters employed in the anterior line; 2) characters in corresponding positions of two lines must share the identical lexical category and have related or opposite meanings; 3) the tone pattern of one line must be the inverse of the other, adhering to level-oblique (**平仄***ping-ze*) patterns (Huang 2004, Chen 2012, Wang 2010). To be more specific, the two lines in Example (10) share repeated characters, and they fail to ensure lexical matches and tonal correspondence.

(10) **愿天下有情人**终成眷属

Yuàn tiānxià yǒuqíngrén zhōng chéng juànshǔ

wish world lover eventually become couple

望世间眷属全是有情人

Wàng shìjiān juànshǔ quán shì yǒuqíngrén

hope world couple all be lover

'Wishing all lovers in the world eventually become couples; hoping all couples in the world are lovers.'

In the Film, there is a scene in which Mulan tells her family about two rabbits (11), which I presume is to allude to the last verse of the Poem pertaining to the indistinguishability between bucks and does, as shown in Example (12).

(11) Black Wind and I rode alongside two rabbits running side by side. I think one was a male, one was a female.

But you know, you can't really tell when they're running that fast.

(12) **雄兔脚扑朔, 雌兔眼迷离; 双兔傍地走, 安能辨我是雄雌**?

Xiong tu jiao pu shuo, ci tu yan mi li; shuang tu bang di zou, an neng bian wo shi xiong ci?

'The male hare wildly kicks its feet; The female hare has shifty eyes, But when a pair of hares runs side by side, Who can distinguish whether I in fact am male or female?' (Kwa and Idema 2010: 3)

There is no denying the fact the Film is faithful to the Poem in this sense, but it fails to demonstrate the cultural connotation implied in the verse. In ancient China, there was a well-established misconstrual concerning the reproduction of rabbits. According to an atheistic book 论衡 *Lun Heng* composed in the Eastern Han (25-220), rabbits are asexually reproduced via their mouths, as shown in Example (13). This misconception was still held by ordinary people during the Qing era, and only intellectuals such as the author of 诗识名解 *Shi Zhi Ming Jie* reprimanded such a misperception recorded in **博物志** *Bo Wu Zhi* (232-300), as shown in Example (14). Owing to rabbits' presumed uniqueness in terms of reproduction, the dedicated patron-god of homosexuals in pre-modern China was called the God of Rabbits, as recorded in a book entitled **子不**语 *Zi Bu Yu* by Yuan Mei (1716-1797) (Vitiello 1992, Szonyi 1998, Stevenson and Wu 2013: 254). Therefore, rabbits used to indicate homosexuality in literary works, such as a novella entitled **兔孕** *Tu Yun* 'Rabbit Pregnancy' composed in 1791, which is categorised into the genre of **志怪** *zhiguai* ('accounts/records of miraculous paranormality and anomalies') (Chiang 2005: 12-13) and features the (pretended) childbearing and childbirth of a male homosexual assuming the uke (bottom) role.

(13) **兔吮毫而**怀子, **及其子生**, **从口而出**。

Tu shun hao er huai zi, ji qi zi sheng, cong kou er chu.

'Rabbits suck fur and become pregnant; they give birth to progenies through mouths.' (Lun Heng: Qi Guai)

(14) **博物志云**, **兔无雄**, **望月而孕**, **口中吐子**, **故**谓之兔, **此**诳语也。

Bo wu zhi yun, tu wu xiong, wang yue er yun, kou zhong tu zi, gu wei zhi tu, ci kuang yu ye.

'According to Bo Wu Zhi, all rabbits are female and they become pregnant by staring at the moon, and they are named because of the characteristic of giving birth to progenies through mouths. This is a lie.' (Shi Zhi Ming Jie)

V CONCLUSION

In this paper, I investigate the reasons why the 2020 film Mulan fails to gain popularity among Chinese audiences, by means of comparing the Film with the Poem of Mulan from a cultural perspective. First and foremost, the core values expressed in the Poem are filial piety and loyalty, as reflected by Mulan's acts of replacing her father to be conscripted, as well as the family separation and reunion. The Film, however, focuses on the significance of being true in a feminist sense.

Moreover, the Film is discrepant from the Poem in terms of supernatural elements. In the Poem, which is void of divine or magical aspect, Mulan is depicted as an ordinary young woman who weaves and wears makeup, which renders her epic of joining the military and deviating from conventional gender norms particularly compelling and revolutionary. Nonetheless, the Film demonstrates a variety of supernatural demonstrations and interventions, including Milan's qi that empowers her yet cannot be wielded by her gender, which is in breach of the Confucian ideology regarding agnosticism and atheism. As for witchcraft abhorred in the Film, it was treated with awe and reverence in pre-modern China.

The Film also demonstrates other details that do not accord with Chinese culture or history. The phoenix accompanying Mulan in the Film is believed to be able to re-emerge after being consumed by flame, whereas fenghuang in traditional Chinese culture has never been associated with rebirth. Another scene that is alien to Chinese audiences is the matchmaker's sharp rebuke for Mulan and her family in public, which is deemed as face-threatening and hence refrained in the collectivist context featured by other-face-oriented, non-confrontational styles of interaction. Additionally, the inter-gender mingling, and the emperor's duel do not adhere to the upper-class ethos in a feudal context. Other details such as Tulou, couplets and rabbits also reflect the Film's lack of understanding of authentic Chinese culture.

In terms of the rationale behind such a discrepancy, being it intentional or unintentional, it is worth exploring in future research.

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