

The Americanization of Confucian Filial Piety in Disney's *Mulan* (1998)

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the Americanized exposure of Confucian filial piety expressed in one of Disney's animated features, *Mulan*. I intend to analyze how Disney reframes the original concept of Confucian filial piety to meet the global understanding of Disney's audience and how Disney's fundamental motives affect Disney's decision on combining Confucian filial piety with American values. In the analysis, I use three main theories, namely americanization, disneyfication, and cultural hybridity related to cultural imperialism. In my analysis, I find that Disney reframes the original concept of Confucian filialness in a more Americanized manner, by injecting some classic American notions such as individualism and equality of opportunity in order to preserve Disney's standardized formula. And yet, the most significant motive is Disney's marketing purpose related to the acceptance of Disney's audience and Disney's reputation as a showbiz industry.

Keywords: Confucianism, filial piety, hybridity, disneyfication, happy-ending formula

Disney animated film first appeared in 1920's following the founding of Disney Animated Studio by Walt Disney. One factor that makes Disney animated films so especially unique among other movie genres is Disney happy-ending formula. Disney basic formula used in most of Disney animated feature films is formulaically characterized with the typical heroes/heroines who will be rewarded a happy ending life and the villains who always ends up being punished. As such, this pattern has long become the signature dish for all Disney's fairy tales and set the basic formula for creating another Disney's fairy tales. Under the influence of this formula, Disney animated films have also transformed the concept of classic narrative pattern in children fairytales forever. For one thing, the formula applied in the original stories is distinct from those of Disney's, because instead of applying a happily-ever-after life for the ending, they start out the story with a happy beginning and finish it with a sad ending. What makes Disney become extremely popular is the fact that Disney brilliantly reversed the original formula by setting up a sad beginning and summarizing the story with a certain happy-ending (Smoodin, 1994. p. 110). The animated feature that I analyze in this paper belongs to Disney Renaissance Era. The Disney Renaissance marks the very era when the Walt Disney Animation Studio set up a new technique of story adaptation. I decided to analyze Disney's work from this particular era because in this era, Disney pioneered the development of story re-interpretation which deals with the addition of Disney signature formula, comical, action, and also romance so that it completely changed the original plot and values implied in the original the fairytales.

Among other Disney celebrated animated features produced and released in this Disney period, I choose to analyze *Mulan* (1998) because *Mulan* is the first Disney animated feature that has drawn the world's attention on Chinese culture. The story of Disney's *Mulan* was re-written by Robert D. San Souci. His work on Disney's *Mulan* (1998) is heavily influenced by his particular interest in the study eastern-culture, especially Chinese Confucianism. This belief roots deep in the way San Souci re-told *Mulan*'s original version, in which, the main protagonist in the movie now has more free will; she is able to escape from strict tradition and achieve happiness in the end without violating the tradition (Buckley, 2011, p. 44).

The story of Disney's *Mulan* follows the life of a Chinese girl named Mulan who disguises herself as a man and fights in the army in order to save her sick father from going to war. Being the only daughter in her family, Mulan is in a dilemma between following Confucian prescription of

women's role and helping her sick father. This uneven position leads Mulan to think that the more she put herself in the world of pretense, the further she would lose her chance of freedom and selfhood. Eventually, Mulan decides to follow her unbearable desire in the pursuit of self-identity. Through Mulan's resistance, she proves her parents, especially her father that she still can fulfill her Confucian role and glorify the family's name without having to give up herself to the society's norms.

Confucianism becomes the central concept in the way Disney re-tells the original Mulan's folklore. According to Stathern (1997), the ancient moral teaching was first established by a Chinese scholar, Confucius (Chinese: *Kong Fu Zi*, 551–479 BC). Since that very point, it had dominated Chinese feudal society for more than two millennia and for that reason; Confucianism had contributed a great influence over Chinese aspects of life such as economy, politics, culture, and most of all Chinese moral guidance (p.5). Confucius stressed the later point as the most important part of his moral teaching. He pointed out that the only way people can reach a filial life is through five basic relationships, which consist of father to son, husband to wife, friend to friend, brother to sister, and also elders to youths. Filial piety emerges from the first relationships that are elders to younger people and also men over women relationship. This patriarchal system has consequently placed elders in the superior position. Having claimed the highest position, elders were given the privilege to make final decisions; therefore, in this relationship, therefore, everyone, especially women, is expected to demonstrate their obedience and respect to "superiors at all costs (Watson, 2007, p. 10).

In the movie, I draw a head start case that Mulan seems to break Confucian principle, but at the end she still shows the act of filial piety by bringing honor to her family. She finally finds her true love, experiences a self-truths adventure that fits her rather boyish personality, and she ends up becoming a hero for her country. In other words, escaping from the strict does not stop Mulan from achieving her own perfect ideals. Following this contradictory representation of filial piety, I am intrigued to analyze the topic related to Confucian filial piety both expressed in the movie and also in the original Confucian principles. Furthermore, I want to find out the way Disney re-stylizes the idea of Confucian filial piety in Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and Disney's reason for combining Confucian concept of filial piety with American values in Disney's *Mulan* (1998). In the analysis, I use the theories of Americanization, Disneyfication, and cultural hybridity to understand how the vast growth of American culture can lead to the reframing of Confucian filial piety in Americanized manner.

According to Ritzer and Stillman (2003), Americanization is defined as the promotion of American customs, lifestyle, language, economy, business practice on the culture of the other countries (p.35). In this context, the word "to Americanize" means "to universalize", "to neutralize", and finally "to dominate" other less popular cultures, so that in the end, the whole nations would gather under one cultural image, the American nation. To be more extreme, American cultural imperialism has allowed western ideologies and moral concepts to universalize other culture, everywhere around the world. In the end, authentic culture would gradually fade away due to the overwhelming influence of American culture (Galeota, 2004, p. 22). For a big nation like America, it is not difficult to implant its cultural superiority to other countries by accessing global market; in terms of selling American image as a cultural icon or media brand (2004, p. 22).

In addition, I also use Frank L. Baum's definition of "Disneyfication", that is "a process that aspires to being a modernized fairytale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heart-aches and nightmares are left-out" (Campbell and McKay, 2004, p. 181). By definition, Disneyfication is a process when a complex fairytale is separated from its grim and gothic elements and then romanticized using Disney happy-ending-pattern. According to Bryman (2004), Disneyfication works by "sweetening fairy tales and therefore ruining the original fairytales' effect and purpose" (p.6). The word "sweetening in here means that Disney attempted to create a smoother or plausible storyline by eliminating the conflict, the abstract and grim imaginary of European 15th century fairytales so that the whole storyline will finally result in a Disneyfied happy ending (2004, p.6). Generally, Disneyfication is easily recognized with a specific style, a standard formula, as well as a set of common themes and values such as light entertainment, comedy and music elements that are relied upon anthropomorphized (human-like) and neotenized (childlike) animal characters as the descriptions of Disney characters. This finally caused classic Disney to always stick to its pattern in order to produce a predictable storyline and standardized character (Wasko, 2001. P. 357).

Besides, I use the theory of cultural hybridity. The term Hybridization was first popularized by a black British culturist, Homi Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Cultural hybridity came from the word “hybrid” which implies a crossbreeding of two subjects, in this sense, an interaction between two different cultures or races that results in a new cultural fusion. Hybridization, thus, refers to a process in which a certain local culture adopts a global one. In relation to globalization, cultural hybridity has yet provided another different outcome of cultural globalization in which it allows different cultures to blend and mingle in a harmonious interval so that they can each share and adapt each cultural element without being limited by a cultural boundary. All of those three cultural theories would help me provide an insightful explanation in understanding Disney’s reframed filial concept.

AMERICANIZING CONFUCIAN FILIAL PIETY

To be able to understand how Disney re-stylizes Confucian concept of filial piety, I first provide a brief background of filial piety expressed in the original Mulan folklore. Then, I further explore the americanized filial piety presented in Disney’s *Mulan*. The Americanized filial piety can be seen in the degradation of Confucian filial piety, debasement of elders’ opinion, Mulan’s democratic family, Mulan’s pursuit of individuality, and Mulan’s rebellion over her gender role.

Filial Piety Expressed in The Original Mulan Folklore

The Ballad of Mulan (Ode of Mulan) was composed in the form of “*yeu-fu*” poetry by a woman named *Tzu-Yeh*. It was allegedly believed to have been written during the Northern Dynasties (c. 800 BC). At the time the story was told, Confucian teaching was already spread across the whole mainland, bringing about a sacred-hierarchical relationship beliefs that is most significantly based on patriarchal system (Stathern, 1997, p. 3). Among all other highlighted Confucian teaching, filial piety is the only point that highlights the concept of self-devotion to parents and elders as an act of promoting the importance of others before oneself. The original folklores describes that Mulan tries to demonstrate her filial role by doing all kinds of womanly works such as weaving, and stays quietly at home as all other Chinese ladies normally do. Until one unfortunate day, her sick father was called on a military service. Physically, Mulan’s father cannot fulfill this imperial duty because he might not survive in the war even if he still insists to go. As a woman brought up in a Confucian family, Mulan is demanded not to interfere men’s business; therefore, she knows that she is strictly forbidden to join the army. And yet, the dilemma between fulfilling her filial role and saving her father has encouraged Mulan to go by the choice of replacing her father’s position in the battlefield. Going against rule does not mean that Mulan is entirely free from Confucian customs. In the end, she realizes that she has to resume her true Confucian duty that is a potential Confucian bride.

Americanized Filial Piety in Disney’s *Mulan* (1998)

Mulan’s original version derives a very thick Confucian values that especially underlies Mulan’s filial relationship with her parents and country throughout the whole ballad. It is, indeed, controversial to compare a real literary form with children animated film as each derives different Confucian application as I find out that Disney prefers to match some notions of Confucianism with American beliefs such as equality of opportunity (freedom of speech), pursuit of individualism and the elevation of women’s role. However, before reaching a happy-ending result from combining both cultural notions, Disney first degrades the level of Confucianism that might disrupt the understanding of Disney’s audiences.

Degraded Level of Filial Piety

Regardless its phenomenal reputation, The Ballad of Mulan has actually triggered some debates of pros and cons concerning the firm and blind-obedience image of Confucian norms expressed in the poem. As a piece of literature, the Ballad of Mulan was consequently specified to the Chinese people, who are, in this case, familiar with the Confucian norms. Therefore, they will not mind Confucian teaching being preached in such a straight-forward way. However, looking at Disney’s global reputation as the world’s leading showbiz industry, there are also some other points that should be put into further consideration such as Disney’s audience and Disney’s happy-ending signature. Confucian filial piety expressed in the ballad does not at all match the image of American

dreams, which emphasize more on the individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Therefore, in order to meet the expectation of the targeted audience and also the standard of Disney fairytales, Disney decides to degrade the level of Confucian norms that were not in line with American values, so that Confucian norms now became more lenient and suitable to the better understanding of Disney's audience.

Debasement of Elders' Opinion

In Confucianism, filial piety is emphasized as the most important point that demand younger people to always demonstrate their obedience to their elders and the elders must educate their younger generation about their Confucian duties in return. Therefore, younger people, especially girls, on the other hand, were always expected to maintain their family's honor by blindly obey any of their elders' wishes without asking for the purpose. Disney's version of filial piety is the very contrary to the original Confucian teaching. In this sense, Disney diffuses this Confucian norm with one of American most cherished principles, individual's equality of opportunity. This value has become an essential part in American life since it is also underlined by a religious view that everyone is created equal (Stewart, 1927, p. 70). Unlike any other Chinese women at that time, Disney describes as a young, intelligent, independent girl. She is not satisfied with her current situation because she is confined by the rigid Confucian tradition that dictates and watches over each of her conduct. Disney version shows that Mulan, regardless her position as a female-younger member in the family, has the same right to express her opinions. When Mulan's father is called on a military service by the emperor, Mulan boldly begs the royal advisor to release her father from the military duty. Further in the film, Mulan, being as strong-headed as she is then confronts her father in the family dinner. She goes on her second attempt to prevent her father from doing his military duty by using every reason that she thinks reasonable enough to break her father's blind obedience.

MULAN : " You shouldn't have to go "

FA LI : "Mulan!"

MULAN : " There are plenty of young men to fight for China"

FA ZHOU : " It is an honor to protect my country and my family"

MULAN : "So you'll die for honor!"

FA ZHOU : (STANDING UP AND ANGERED) " I will DIE doing what's right"

MULAN : "But, if you-----" (CUT OFF)

FA ZHOU : " I know my place, it's time you learned yours"

In a real Confucian family, it is completely disrespectful for a senior male member to be corrected by a mere innocent girl. Through Mulan's disrespectful manner, Disney would like emphasize that tradition may influence their way of thinking as well as their behavior, but it is their self-determination that will later bring them to their real purpose in life. Mulan's bravery in expressing her dissatisfaction also indicates that instead of gaining respect, both Fa Zhou and Grandma Fa have lost their sense of superiority.

Mulan's Democratic Family

From childhood to teenager, she was raised in a very thick Confucian patriarchal family that, as usual, prioritizes elders' importance before others. However, living in such a Confucian family even makes Mulan grow more uncontrollable each day. Her parents, for one, do not take this too seriously due to the fact that Mulan is the only daughter, or in other word, the only hope that they can count on to support them in their old days. With Mulan's being the only hope for the Fa Family, Fa Zhou lets Mulan act in whatever way she thinks the best for her even if it may sometime bring disgrace to Fa Zhou. Having written by American people also makes Mulan lives up the American values. Democracy, in this sense, is the big theme from which Mulan's free-spirited attitude rooted throughout the movie. Stewart (1972) explained the American concept of democracy that this particular American beliefs insists on individuals' dignity and self-worth; that each person is a separate beings, free to speak, to act, and to think in the way they desire without being interfered with somebody else's importance. (p. 70)

Unlike Confucian teaching, the context of "family honor" that the Fa family upholds is based on western individualist-view. They let Mulan become the kind of person she wants, they do not even punish Mulan for not following the society's expectation. In other word, Mulan's family's

ignorance implies that they respect Mulan's choice and they expect Mulan to be responsible for her life. FA ZHOU : My, My what beautiful blossoms we have this year. But, LOOK this one's late; when it blooms it will be the most beautiful of all.

Even though Mulan has repeatedly disgraced her family by her wild and humiliating manner, Fa Zhou's democratic view allows him to regard Mulan's disobedience as an act of shame. On the contrary, Fa Zhou values Mulan's affection and leaves the rest of Mulan's fate on her hands; at the very matter of what Mulan would finally become, or the kind of impact that Mulan would make completely rest upon Mulan's decisions.

Mulan's Pursuit of Individuality

Living in a Confucian society clearly means that Mulan is also living under the society's expectation. Since childhood they were taught about the basic understanding concerning their social position as a woman that is always under the strict control of superior members, that in any situations, they were expected to show nothing else but respects and filialness to their superiors. Mulan's democratic upbringing, however, does not seem to support her in fulfilling her social expectations. For one thing, instead of programming Mulan's young mind with Confucian principles, they allow her to take control of her own life. Their social status as Mulan's superiors demands them to educate Mulan her and to always remind her about fulfilling filial duty, and yet they do not necessarily instruct her to go exactly by the existing custom.

For this reason, Mulan finally comes to the point that she is never genetically programmed to meet this social expectation and at the same way it also validates Mulan's doubt that she does not belong in this Confucian society. Disney sets up a complicated rising action in the beginning as a technique to give rise the very notion of self-individualism. "Individualism" in its whole meaning promotes an idea that people are born independent and on the wheel of their own self-interest. Individualism, itself, is included among the most fundamental American values which, in its own application, best represents America's personality. Americans have the tendency to see themselves first and foremost as separated beings, equipped with both freedom and self-responsibility to run their own lives, set their own goals, and also propose their own final decisions (Stewart, 1972, p. 70). Taking the basis on this value, Disney interprets Mulan's disguise more as an opportunity for the main character to escape her dull and socially enslaved life. Mulan believes this opportunity would help her redeem her filial failure, because in here she can just be herself, "the free-spirited Mulan" that she no longer needs to conceal her self-competence in her own way without being dictated by anyone. From the beginning, Mulan is aware of her hidden potentials, a bunch of unexplored skills that differ her from her fellow women and yet the one thing that prevents her from developing those unique competences is the Confucian rules.

Mulan's Rebellion over Her Gender Limitation

Throughout the movie, women's roles are the very point that Disney wants to highlight. As has been previously mentioned, Women are dependent to men and were always treated as the subordinates. Confucius dictates in his book of *san cong si de* that Chinese women could only serve their country by bearing sons who then would join the military service to defend their country (Li, 1992, pp. 72-76).

As being so contradictorily described by Disney, Mulan does not at all match the characteristics and the standard of a perfect Confucian woman. She rather describes herself as an independent resolutely vocal girl who refuses to be entirely bound by complicated Confucian standards. Together with Mulan's resistance, she points out that she refuses to put herself in the entire loyal pretense and deception where her "right" as a free individual is at the stake. Mulan reaches the point where she develops her sense of equality between her positions with most men without taking further regard with their age gap. Mulan also learns that her previous humiliating accident has consequently labeled her a failure, both as a woman and a daughter. As a woman, she cannot be a potential bride, on the other hand, as a daughter; she cannot glorify her family's honor. Nevertheless, she cannot stay intact with the society's expectations for a perfect Confucian woman, because if she still insists on doing so, she will never be her herself.

"Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride
Or a perfect daughter

Can it be?
I'm not meant to play this part?
Now I see
That if I were truly to be myself
I would break my family's heart"
(Disney *Mulan*, 1998)

Taking on this reflection, she still has so many hidden potentials that she is yet to reveal once she gets herself out of this oppressive society. This entire time, she has attempted to make herself the kind of woman that her society expects her to be, but she cannot keep pretending to act like a perfect woman at the same time only to appease her family when her heart encourages her to be her true self. By setting up the following central conflict, Disney would like the audience to identify a huge transformation in Mulan from being a failed Confucian woman to a highly praised warrior. Mulan's progressive transformation in the training reflects a contrast to Mulan's filial failure at her interview with the matchmaker. In the end, Mulan's strong determination yields her a great victory. The act of saving the whole country indicates that Mulan is a super-heroine who can still fulfill her role in the society as well as stand equally tall as any men without being fully overshadowed by the social norms.

DISNEYFICATION OF MULAN

The americanized filial piety shown in the previous part explains Disney's motives in presenting Mulan story to a wider global audience. As a showbiz industry, Disney is equipped with a special ability to alter Mulan original text and then create another new context in many different ways. In Disney's opinion, if the company still insists on employing the original filial concept, the movie won't obtain any good reviews from Disney's audiences. Having considered this reason, Disney wants to engage Disney's standardized formula for its marketing purpose.

Preserving Disney's Formulaic Trademark

For more than seven decades, the Walt Disney Company is distinguishably known for its typical happy-ending formula. Needless to say, applying such standardized formula to the stories has greatly affected the way people see the original fairytales nowadays. The kind of story that they would fondly prefer is the one presented in children animated media by Disney (Wasko, 2001, p. 351). Mulan, however, is yet another different case. For one thing, the original Mulan legend is not in the form of classic fairytales. It was, in fact, a collection of Chinese lyrical poetry (*yeuh-fe*), without a clear plot and most of all void of happy-ending. Therefore, in order to preserve such trademark, Disney must always stick to the "fixed" formula to create a plausible entertainment aimed for universal consumption. In other word, If Disney ever changes just a tiny bit of the formulaic pattern or even takes a bold move in creating another new formula, the products will not sell well in the market and above all worst possibilities, Disney will lose the company's typical characteristics as the most prominent children's storytelling brand

Disney's Marketing Perspective

Disney, after all, is a showbiz industry. Therefore, aside from providing a family-based entertainment, Disney also aims for the marketing purpose. As a modern showbiz industry that is still clinging on the old recipe (formula), Disney is driven by the motive to produce any forms of entertainments that are "marketable" to the stupendous demands of their consumers (Wasko, 2001, p. 355). In that case, Disney's formula is the essential element that keeps the business on track. By preserving the use of Disney's formula, Disney proves the other competitors that Disney is a far more dominant player in showbiz industry (2001, p. 355). Disney's attempt of reframing Mulan folktale in a more globalized manner has provoked the birth of a new hybridized product resulted from combining both cultural elements (America and Chinese). In some degree, Disney audiences still get to sense a spark of American values and Disney's classic philosophy injected in the story, allowing it a more wide spreading display of eastern culture to global media consumption. On other manner, Disney still presents the "asianess" of the folklore.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis I learned that the kind of filialness image presented in the movie has swerved further from the original Confucian filial piety. By reframing Confucian concept of filialness in American context, Disney attempts to amplify the major filial theme in a more approachable way to the understanding of Disney's loyal audiences. There are also two major motives that affect Disney's decision in re-framing Confucian concept of filial piety. The first is Disney's typical trademark related to the company's happy-ending signature. The second and most significant motive is Disney's marketing purpose in relation to the acceptance of Disney's audiences and also Disney's global reputation as a showbiz industry. In terms of fulfilling these two specific demands, Disney creates a hybrid version of the legend by combining both western and eastern cultural elements.

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