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Orientalism and Representations of Hua Mulan: A Comparative Analysis of the 2020 Film Adaptations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of Hua Mulan in the 2020 film adaptations produced in the USA and China through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism, assessing the cultural and political implications of these representations. The study begins with a historical overview of Hua Mulan's adaptations, focusing on how the 2020 films reflect cultural stereotypes, gender dynamics, and the tension between individualistic and collective values. By comparing these productions, it highlights the perpetuation of Western stereotypes about Asian cultures and contrasts them with China's narrative strategies. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of analyzing cultural representations in cinema as a tool for understanding broader political and social dynamics. It argues that Said's framework remains relevant for examining how the "Other" is depicted in contemporary films, and proposes new insights into the political power of cinema in shaping public perceptions. This discussion contributes to the existing debates on Orientalism, offering a nuanced critique of cultural representation and its role in reinforcing or challenging stereotypes.

Keywords: martial arts, orientalism, individualism, collectivism, Chinese cinema

INTRODUCTION

This article conducts a comparative exploration of Hua Mulan's portrayal in two 2020 films: Disney's *Mulan* and Rhapsody Pictures' *Matchless Mulan* (无双花木兰 – *Wúshuāng Huā Mùlán*). By analyzing these adaptations through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism, the study investigates how cultural and political nuances manifest in their narratives, visual styles, and character development, with particular focus on gender roles and the tension between collective and individual identity. These representations reflect the influence of the films' production origins, offering insights into cross-cultural tensions in cinematic portrayals.

Hua Mulan is a historical figure whose adaptations have evolved over time, often reflecting broader cultural and political dynamics. The comparison of these recent films, produced in distinct cultural contexts, reveals how stereotypes and ideological frameworks shape representations of Asian cultures in global cinema. This study emphasizes the relevance of Said's Orientalism for analyzing such portrayals, particularly as they relate to ongoing debates about identity, gender, and power.

Utilizing a comparative methodology, this research is organized into several sections. It begins with an overview of Hua Mulan's historical background, explores film adaptations from the 1920s to 2020, and culminates in an analysis of the 2020 films within Said's framework. By highlighting the intersection of cultural context and cinematic narrative, the article underscores the importance of cross-cultural perspectives in shaping interpretations of historical figures in contemporary film.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, numerous studies have examined the Asian context through the lens of Orientalism, highlighting how cinematic representations both reflect and challenge stereotypes. Park and Wilkins (2005) underscore the reductive portrayal of Asians in Western media, often depicted as villains or submissive characters, which contributes to the exoticization seen in films like *Charlie's Angels* and *Kill Bill*. Vukovich (2012) discusses the concept of "Sinological-orientalism," which reflects a vision of China as inevitably conforming to Western cultural norms.

The static and monolithic portrayal of Chinese culture, ignoring its complexities and transformations, is a key theme explored by Zhang (2019). Zhao (2023) further examines the influence of post-colonialism on Chinese cinema, where exotic cultural elements are used to construct an Oriental image centered on Western perspectives. Yepez (2023) introduces the concept of "Ornamentalism," describing how costumes in films transform Asian women into ornamental hybrids, stripping away their humanity and agency.

In the realm of digital media, Araujo and Albuquerque (2024) analyze how Netflix's algorithm reinforces stereotypical views of China in Brazil, focusing on the imperial past and martial arts while neglecting contemporary transformations. Sotomayor (2021) provides a comprehensive examination of Mulan adaptations, exploring how gender norms and cross-dressing challenge societal conventions and highlighting tensions between historical accuracy and authenticity in these adaptations.

Collectively, these works provide a critical foundation for understanding how Orientalism shapes the portrayal of Hua Mulan in cinema, emphasizing the cultural and political complexities involved.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach to analyze the selected works. The 2020 films Mulan by Disney and *Matchless Mulan* by Rhapsody Pictures were accessed through YouTube. This platform enabled full viewing of the productions for detailed analysis. It is important to note that the availability of content on YouTube may be intermittent due to channel policies and platform rule changes, which can affect the sustainability of online content over time.

Sources of academic articles and other theoretical support were accessed via platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and SciELO. Keywords such as "Hua Mulan," "Orientalism," "cultural representation," "2020 films," "Chinese cinema," and "Chinese cinema + Orientalism" were used to retrieve relevant information. Materials were selected based on their relevance to the critical focus on cultural representations, with an emphasis on gender issues and narrative constructions related to cultural aspects.

The primary analysis of this research utilized Edward Said's Orientalism as the main theoretical reference, presenting approaches that illustrate narrative aspects of the works, including gender dynamics and specific ways of representing cultural, visual, and character structuring elements. Dialogues and specific scenes were highlighted to demonstrate how these elements were addressed.

ANALYSIS OF CHOSEN FILMS: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Before discussing the selected films, it is essential to provide a brief context for Hua Mulan's story. Over the years, Mulan has been portrayed in various interpretations, each reflecting the political and cultural aspects of its time. The story dates back to the 6th century and has influenced literature, theater, music, and cinema (Sotomayor, 2021, p. 52).

A Historical Overview of Hua Mulan in Film

From the 1920s to the 1930s, Mulan was featured in adaptations such as *Mulan Joins the Army*, produced by Tianyi Film Company and China Sun Motion Picture Company (Zhang, 2004, p. 42). During the late 1930s, amid the Second Sino-Japanese War, nationalist sentiments influenced another version (Zhang and Xiao, 2002, p. 18). In 1964, Hong Kong's musical *Hua Mulan* portrayed a confident character critical of military morality (Sotomayor, 2021, p. 85).

Disney's adaptations in the 1990s and 2000s emphasized female independence (Sotomayor, 2021, p. 128) but faced criticism for Westernization. The 2009 Chinese version directed by Jingle Ma focused on patriotism and filial piety. In 2020, both Disney and Chinese productions revisited Hua Mulan's story, each reflecting different cultural perspectives.

Analysis of "*Matchless Mulan*": Identity, Collectivism, and Purpose

The Chinese version of Hua Mulan, starring 胡雪儿 (*Xue'er Hu*), is set during a threat from the Rouran army to the Chinese border during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Initially, the character's dilemma is portrayed as a family issue, as she decides to take on her elderly father's military duties in the army by disguising herself as a man.

The first theme is filial love, which motivates the character's decision, reflecting Confucian traditions. This is evident in several moments throughout the film. For example, the character states that she is not there to kill, but to fight in her father's name. The narrative builds on this motivation, portraying her reluctance to take human lives and framing combat as a military obligation far removed from her personal reasons.

The film depicts military relationships akin to a family dynamic, uniting people not only through blood ties but also through bonds of complicity formed toward a common goal, where hierarchical relationships do not undermine bonds of complicity. These relationships, initially seen as friendships within the military, expand as the narrative unfolds, symbolizing the idea of a collective family.

Flora Botton Beja (1999, p. 460) studied Chinese family relations and the State, referencing a 1964 government pamphlet that underscores the link between love, marriage, family, and society. The pamphlet emphasizes how a harmonious family contributes to production and social well-being, supporting the socialist construction cause. This idea resonates in the analyzed film and earlier versions before the communist revolution.

The director dedicates the film to the Chinese People's Liberation Army, emphasizing the connection between the family drama and broader issues such as nationalism. Mulan's journey illustrates the expansion of the family concept to encompass the larger community, represented by the state. She expresses this notion by revealing her gender, claiming to fight in her father's name, for her family's safety, and to end the war, promoting collective well-being and national prosperity.

The plot reveals Mulan's transition from a devoted daughter to a defender of the country, emphasizing collectivism. This journey begins with personal issues, particularly her relationship with her parents, and extends to form family ties within the army, depicted through interactions among the characters. The film culminates in the idea that the country functions as a large family, where national issues are addressed collectively to resolve familial concerns. In this sense, family relationships transcend blood ties and become an extension of society and the state.

Camaraderie among the characters is evident in scenes of shared suffering, such as when a prisoner's brothers die, leaving everyone profoundly affected. This connection marks a pivotal moment in the film, emphasizing unity and collectivism over individualism, as seen in scenes where everyone washes their clothes together.

On the other hand, gender issues are not the primary focus of the narrative. The protagonist, who disguises herself as a man, is portrayed simply by tying her hair to appear masculine. At certain points, it remains unclear whether she has revealed her true identity, as she continues to be referred to with masculine pronouns until the moment of her revelation. This revelation, however, is not treated with the same intensity as in Western versions. Instead, Mulan's moral values and her commitment to her country and family overshadow potential gender-related dilemmas, offering a distinct perspective on the story.

Analysis of Disney's "*Mulan*": Gender, Identity, and Cultural Representation

Disney's version of Mulan, released in 2020, takes a different narrative approach from the Chinese version, *Matchless Mulan*, focusing on themes of identity, gender, and cultural representation. While the Chinese version is in Mandarin, Disney's version is entirely in English, targeting an international audience. The narrative begins by emphasizing Mulan's childhood and her martial skills. It introduces gender roles through dialogues about marriage, suggesting a more "liberal" perspective on gender roles, as represented by Mulan's father, in contrast to the conservatism often associated with Chinese culture.

The reference to the Silk Road and scenes filmed in Xinjiang allude to the Belt and Road Initiative, attempting to connect the film to contemporary China, despite controversies involving human rights violations in the region. Disney's version includes a character with magical abilities, delving into the concept of 气 (*qì,* also romanized as "chi")[1] as a mystical force. This portrayal perpetuates common stereotypes found in martial arts films, where Asian cultures are often framed as inherently mystical and exotic.

A similar dynamic is evident in martial arts films produced in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Bloodsport* (1988) and *Kickboxer* (1989), both starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. These films popularized an aesthetic of choreographed combat and mystical elements, reinforcing the notion of the "exotic Orient." As Chris Hamm (2018, Chapter 6) notes, Hong Kong martial arts films have significantly shaped a "transnational action cinema," detaching martial arts from their historical and cultural roots to create globally marketable symbols. This decontextualization is epitomized in *The Matrix* (1999), where Neo declares, "I know kung fu," portraying martial

[1] 气 (*qì*) is a fundamental principle in Traditional Chinese Medicine, recognized by the World Health Organization since the 1990s as part of its International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

arts as a genre trope rather than a cultural practice. Even recent productions like *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) emphasize the "Chineseness" of martial arts as part of a fantastical vision of Chinese culture, blending mysticism and exoticism to appeal to international audiences. Through this lens, Disney's portrayal of "chi" aligns with broader cinematic patterns that both simplify and mystify Asian cultures for global consumption.

Visually, the version produced in the United States stands out for its use of vibrant colors and exaggerated makeup, contrasting with the comparatively more realistic costumes of the Chinese version. The colors and makeup are employed to depict various Chinese ethnicities allegorically, incorporating references to cultural figures such as Japanese *geishas*. While the Chinese version emphasizes family and collectivity, Disney emphasizes Mulan's gender conflicts and individualism, particularly by highlighting her martial skills within a traditionally masculine framework.

The relationship between Mulan and the sorceress, who is initially an antagonist but later becomes supportive, exemplifies how the version produced in the United States addresses gender issues more intensely than the Chinese version. Disney's approach narrows the theme of filial love, focusing primarily on affection within the nuclear family and without substantially extending to relationships among soldiers or the state. In contrast, the Chinese version portrays the state as an extension of the family, deserving the same care and respect.

The culmination of this perspective occurs when Mulan observes the words 忠勇真 *(zhōng yǒng zhēn*, meaning loyalty, courage, and truth). While each word carries its own meaning, the ideogram 真 (*zhēn*, meaning "truth") is placed at the center, symbolizing Mulan's focus on the sword and her reflection. This moment suggests that truth is fundamental for her to embrace and manifest her feminine strength.

Thus, Disney's Mulan diverges significantly from the Chinese version by placing strong emphasis on the challenges faced by the character as a woman in society and her struggle against traditional gender expectations. Individuality is emphasized as a way to address dilemmas surrounding the freedom to express one's gender. Filial love, on the other hand, is portrayed narrowly as affection between parents and children without extending significantly to soldiers or the nation. While referencing key aspects of Mulan's traditional story, such as her connection to her family and her country, Disney's version prioritizes gender-related issues as the central conflict driving the narrative. Ultimately, the story revolves around Mulan's struggle to accept her true identity, a challenge reflected in both her family environment, where she faces societal expectations, and the military, where she asserts her individuality.

ORIENTALISM AND REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-WESTERN CULTURES

Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism* (1979) is organized into three main parts, each subdivided into smaller segments. In this work, Said argues that Orientalism is a Western discourse that constructs and perpetuates a distorted image of the East, serving as a tool of intellectual and political domination. By framing the Orient as an inferior and exoticized counterpart to the West, Orientalism reinforces colonial ideologies and justifies Western hegemony. This theoretical framework remains relevant for analyzing how cultural representations shape global perceptions of non-Western societies. The first chapter, "*The Scope of Orientalism*," addresses a wide range of historical, philosophical, and political dimensions. The second chapter, "*Orientalist Structures and Restructure*," investigates the evolution of modern Orientalism, exploring common elements in the works of renowned poets, artists, and scholars. The third chapter, "*Orientalism Now*," discusses the period from the 1870s onwards, marked by colonial expansion and culminating in the Second World War. This chapter describes the transition from British and French hegemony to the influence of the United States in the field of Orientalism.

Although the book's focus is often on the "Middle East," Said does not limit Orientalism to that area. He includes references to cultures and practices from countries such as India, China, and Japan, applying his analyses to the entire East (Said, 1979, p. 17). Said discusses the "Secularization of Orientalism," citing a 1922 speech by John Buchan that attributes chaotic energy and disorganized intelligence to China, painting a pejorative portrait of the non-Western world (Said, 1979, p. 251). Additionally, he quotes George Orwell regarding his visit to Marrakesh in 1939, where Orwell's descriptions reinforce the idea of Western superiority (Said, 1979, p. 251).

In cinematographic terms, China had significant film production at the beginning of the 20th century, illustrating the presence of Western technology in a developing non-Western world. According to Chen Yu's article "Beyond 'Exoticism': Strategies for Constructing the Images of China in Western Movies" (2018, p. 786), the U.S. Department of Commerce instructed its ambassadors and consuls to research Chinese film production and the Chinese market in 1920. By 1946, China had imported over 200 Hollywood films, with the foreign film flow restricted only after the 1949 Revolution and resuming in the 1980s.

This section illustrates how Asian representations in the Hua Mulan films reflect elements of Orientalism discussed by Said. The narratives, visual elements, performances, and character constructions in the two films contribute to the construction of Western perceptions of the East, particularly of China.

The Representation of China in "Mulan" Through Orientalism

When analyzing films, it is important to recognize that fictional film productions and documentaries do not present an absolute and neutral reality. They offer a subjective perspective on past events, organized through editing techniques to enhance understanding and assimilation. As Dai Vaughan stated in the epigraph of a writing by Paul Henley, "A film is about something, and reality is not" (Gonçalves, 2016, p. 21). Necessarily, a sequence of images is arranged to create a narrative that begins from a specific point of view. In this sense, Park and Wilkins (2005) highlight how Western media often exoticizes and simplifies Asian cultures, which aligns with the subjective portrayal of Hua Mulan in different film adaptations.

Thus, the first step is to consider that nothing prevents a film, or any other cultural production, from exercising a certain interpretive freedom or even adapting the story based on a particular interpretation of the central elements that characterize the plot. This reinterpretation is inevitable; therefore, the intention here is not to judge the adapted elements as if they were distorting the true story of Hua Mulan.

Adaptations are also present in Chinese versions. The aim is to analyze these adaptations to understand them in the light of Said's Orientalism. However, as Vukovich (2012) discusses in his concept of "Sinological-orientalism," Western adaptations often impose Western cultural norms onto Eastern stories. Similarly, Chinese adaptations are not free from motivations stemming from the context of the social group adapting the story. Hilary Sotomayor (2021) illustrates in her research how Mulan has undergone adaptations throughout Chinese history, all influenced by the country's unique political context. Likewise, non-Chinese adaptations are shaped by their own motivations. In this sense, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism helps us understand the non-Chinese motivations present in the interpretations of Hua Mulan, even if indirectly.

> "Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient." (Said, 1979, p. 22)

This perspective is echoed by Zhang (2019), who highlights how Western depictions often portray Chinese culture in a static and monolithic way, ignoring its complexities and transformations.

Another important aspect to consider is the film as a marketable commodity, developed over decades and encompassing not only economic but also political interests. Alfred Gell (2018, p. 47) discusses the concept of agency in objects, particularly art objects, exploring how these objects carry the agency of their creators and become part of the "relational fabric." Regarding the impact of film distribution on international trade, Zhao (2023, p. 14) analyzes the influence of postcolonialism and demonstrates how international elements are incorporated, using the films *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *Perhaps Love* (2005) as examples.

In this sense, art objects must be understood within the relational context of any social group in which they circulate. Such objects carry agency, closely associated with those who possess them. This argument aligns with Dawsey's reflections in the article *Tecidos de fragmentos, migrações entre antropologia e cinema* (2013) (Fabrics of Fragments: Migrations between Anthropology and Cinema) by Diana Paola Gómez Mateus (2013), which discusses how cinema can serve as a transformative narrative form for society.

From the moment a certain representation of the East is embedded in an object (the film) that is distributed to various locations, it becomes essential to study not only the individual components of this object—such as actors, costumes, and dialogues—but also how it interacts within its relational context.

When analyzing cinema in general, and particularly films that retell stories traditionally set in China, language plays a crucial role. The Disney version being spoken in English and the Chinese version in Mandarin reflect the cultural differences and target audiences of each production. While subtitles enable broader access, audience identification is more intense when the native language is used. Araujo and Albuquerque (2024, p. 3) discuss how the cultural imperialism of the United States established itself as a global model during the second half of the 20th century. In this sense, language extends beyond communication; it encompasses various forms of media expression that contribute to elements of a dominant culture and its normative aspects.

The intention behind using the English language goes beyond a purely marketing objective. This is particularly evident given that the film was not only produced for the United States market but also released on streaming platforms in numerous countries where English is not the official language. English, therefore, even if agreed upon as a lingua franca, cannot be understood as politically neutral. While such conventions facilitate the internationalization of content, they also provide a more comfortable and accessible experience for native English speakers.

The differences between the films, therefore, signify adaptations influenced by the varying interests of their time and producers. Examining productions that use the same story as a foundation but are recreated in different

countries, such as China and the United States, reveals that interpretations are undoubtedly shaped by each culture's perspective—on themselves (in the Chinese context) and on the Eastern Other (in the United States context). However, understanding history within the culture itself is less problematic compared to the interpretation made by those in a dominant position of power, as described by Said's concept of Orientalism.

Some elements in the film are retained to depict the story of Hua Mulan, but the manner in which each is portrayed reflects their respective contexts. In both productions, the main character, Hua Mulan, maintains key elements of the story as it is traditionally told in China. She assumes a male identity to join the army, driven by a family matter. In this sense, both characters emphasize the importance of filial love, as Mulan takes on her father's military duties.

The antagonist character is constructed similarly in both productions, with crude characteristics and a consistent display of insensitivity towards Mulan's country. Additionally, both productions incorporate elements of magic, which are associated with the antagonistic side and represented by a female character.

In relation to potential similarities and subsequent suitability for the Chinese interpretation of Hua Mulan, it is intriguing to examine the passage where Edward W. Said (Said, 1979, p. 243) discusses T. E. Lawrence's portrayal of the East, also known as Lawrence of Arabia. Said considers it an example of how Orientalism can reaffirm the technological, political, and cultural dominance of the West, rather than fostering a profound and genuine understanding of the East. Said argues that Lawrence, despite being one of the first Westerners to immerse himself deeply in Arab culture, still viewed the East through a Western lens. According to Said, Lawrence emphasized the exotic and picturesque aspects of the East rather than seeking to understand the region on its own terms. Moreover, he framed the East as a site of conflict between Western and Eastern cultures.

Said further notes that Lawrence's narrative holds a certain authority in the East, where he portrays himself as an "unmediated expert" and a powerful presence, temporarily embodying the East. However, the events ultimately become confined to Lawrence's personal experiences, framed as representative of the entire region.

> "(...) style is not only the power to symbolize such enormous generalities as Asia, the Orient, or the Arabs; it is also a form of displacement and incorporation by which one voice becomes a whole history, and – for the white Westerner, as reader or writer – the only kind of Orient it is possible to know." (Said, 1979, p. 243)

This perspective invites us to reflect on the respect given to certain prominent elements of the story in films like Mulan. The use of Asian or Chinese actors famous in the West, as seen in the Disney production, does not necessarily guarantee an accurate portrayal of the story's underlying cultural details. Similarly, examining China from a specific lens can lead to an oversimplified narrative about the country as a whole. Being a widely commercialized work, the film imposes this narrative as the sole representation.

The lack of respect for elements such as filial love, as portrayed in the Chinese interpretation, the excessive focus on gender conflict from a Western perspective, and the disregard for the significance Mulan places on her country (replaced in the United States version by the emperor's role) are all examples of the Orientalism imposed on the historical narrative.

Regarding the political dimension underlying the plot's conflicts, both films emphasize the protagonist's actions as a response to the need to defend the country's borders against an external threat. However, the Chinese version delves deeper into the political organization of the time, specifically referencing the Wei kingdom's government. In contrast, Disney's version chooses to mention a central government in China, addressing an "unnamed" empire. While the Disney version references the Silk Road, it suggests connections to contemporary history and reinforces the idea of "the East" as a place of trade and cultural exchange.

The dilemma surrounding Mulan's gender is present in both films, albeit with different approaches. The Disney version emphasizes this issue more prominently, with dialogues and scenes challenging traditional female roles. The Chinese version, while addressing this theme, adopts a more collective perspective, framing Mulan's struggle in the context of the war rather than an individual dilemma. This gives the impression that Mulan's entry into the army is a practical solution to the larger problem of defending the Wei kingdom, motivated by filial piety.

Thus, even though the approach seems similar in both cases, the reading differs significantly. Disney's version emphasizes a gender dispute between males and females, starting with Mulan's relationship with her father, the family's expectations for her to conform to traditional gender roles in the village, the sexist interactions among men in the army, and Mulan's personal struggle to reveal her true identity. Interestingly, the antagonist begins to show sympathy towards Mulan, recognizing their shared experiences as women and seeing her as a potential ally.

The reading on this topic, therefore, aligns with gender debates prominent in Western countries. It assumes a responsibility to "civilize" countries considered "exotic," where such issues may not be addressed in their own way. To achieve this, the film relies on an exotic premise that Asian women lack the capacity to exercise agency, as if this ability only existed in the West. Andrea Yepez (2023), further explores this dynamic, arguing that Asian women's attire has historically been used to commodify their identities, turning them into objects of fascination

for Western audiences. The author describes how Anna May Wong, confined to stereotypical Oriental roles, reinforced Western fantasies of the exotic East. *In Bits of Life* (Marshall Neilan, 1921), she played a suffering wife who kills her opium-addicted husband, perpetuating the image of Chinese immigrants as eternal outsiders. Seeking to escape such roles, Wong moved to Europe, where she starred in *Piccadilly* (E. A. Dupont, 1929) and *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), though still within Orientalist constructions (Yepez, 2023, p. 45–46).

The main film productions in China at the beginning of the 20th century already featured female protagonists in the majority, including the initial versions of *Hua Mulan*. Hilary Sotomayor (2021, p. 87) argues that the early versions of *Mulan Joins the Army* placed greater emphasis on the gender dilemma, whereas adaptations like *Lady General Hua Mulan* and Liu Guoquan and Zhang Xinshi's Henan opera may have downplayed the empowerment of women and feminist principles. In fact, the emphasis on individual emancipation of women is more prominent in the United States version analyzed here. In contrast, the Chinese version embeds the dilemma faced by women within a larger collective cause.

The issue at hand is the prevailing interpretation of the topic, rather than whether the topic is addressed or not. The difference between the two readings primarily lies in two worldviews: an individualistic perspective, which I refer to as liberal narratives, and a collectivist perspective, described by Sotomayor (2021, p. 87) as communist narratives. The collectivist worldview contextualizes the gender debate within broader power dynamics, while the liberal narratives emphasize individual struggles without considering these dynamics.

This substitution of the Chinese interpretation of the character's gender predicament with a Westernized interpretation aligns with Said's argument regarding the outcome of Lawrence's writings:

> "The effect of this style is that it brings Asia tantalizingly close to the West, but only for a brief moment. We are left at the end with a sense of the pathetic distance still separating "us" from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West." (Said, 1979, p. 244)

Two other important aspects that differentiate the narratives are the representation of filial piety and the construction of family relationships in the films. Analyzing these performances requires considering the insights of Richard Schechner (2013, p. 41):

> "Performance is a broad spectrum of forms of entertainment, arts, rituals, politics, economics, and person-to-person interactions. Anything and everything can be studied 'as' performance" (translation by the author)

Rubens Alves da Silva (2013, p. 107), referencing Jean Langdon in discussions on performance, highlights the importance of context:

> "(…) analyzing narrative events, it is necessary to consider the context in which they are presented and pay attention to the resources used by the narrator to attract the audience's attention and signal the beginning of the performance." (translation by the author)

In the Disney film, family dynamics align with Western family values, influenced by principles common in Judeo-Christian societies. While similar elements are portrayed in the Chinese version, specific details highlight distinct differences, reflecting the Chinese interpretation of filial piety—a core aspect of Hua Mulan's story.

In the United States version, Mulan is depicted as having a hidden power called "chi." This power sparks a debate between her parents, who hold opposing views about its use. Her father begins by asking his ancestors if they could conceal Mulan's "*chi*," explaining that traditionally, only men are allowed to manifest it. He warns that if she uses it, it will bring shame and dishonor. Despite this, he initially seems to approve of her using the power, while her mother defends patriarchal traditions that subordinate women. "*Chi*," at this stage, is associated with masculinity. Her mother even warns that villagers might accuse her of being a witch.

Although Mulan's father seems to support her using this power, he eventually aligns with his wife's views, reaffirming that only men can wield "chi" and emphasizing that Mulan's duty is to bring honor to the family. This interpretation of "chi" as a masculine concept reflects a Westernized perspective on family dynamics in ancient China. It arises from superficial parallels with challenges faced by men and women in historical Western societies.

An emblematic scene occurs during a family dinner, where Mulan's father declares his obligation to go to war. As a former war hero, he insists it is his duty to fight, while Mulan's mother pleads with him not to go. When Mulan questions his ability to fight, he asserts his authority by striking the table and declaring, "I am your father. I must bring honor to the family on the battlefield." He then shouts, "You are the daughter. Put yourself in your place," before leaving the room.

This portrayal of a woman unable to assume a man's position, using a power reserved for men, and facing accusations of witchcraft, resonates with gender dilemmas reminiscent of the Inquisition period in medieval

Western societies. A similar dynamic can be observed in the Salem witch trials, where women who challenged social norms were accused of sorcery. This association is likely to be absorbed by Western feminist audiences.

In the Chinese version, Mulan's father is portrayed as visibly older and in poorer health. Her mother assists him in walking as they approach a house where a psychic woman appears, seemingly capable of foreseeing Hua Mulan's destiny. The scene includes a turtle, manipulated by the psychic woman, which symbolizes Mulan's connection to her future journey.

The psychic makes predictions about Hua Mulan's future life, leaving her parents worried as they depart. Her father speaks with her mother, who comforts him. Shortly after, her parents discover Mulan engaged in a fight with a boy. Her father warns her of punishment, but their interaction is interrupted by the arrival of the Emperor of Wei's messenger, summoning him to war.

In the following dialogue, Mulan's father explains to her mother that he must go to war because their country has been invaded, and as a military advisor, it is his duty. Despite his poor health, he tells her that if he does not return, she must find a suitable family for Mulan. He adds, "From now on, do not let her use guns anymore."

These introductory moments in the films are emblematic, helping us understand how families are represented. In the United States version, the central objective revolves around family values. Despite the external demand (the emperor's summons), the dinner table dialogue highlights the father's moral duty to go to war. Simultaneously, he insists that Mulan must recognize her place as a daughter and a woman. His authority is depicted through physical actions, such as punching the table, intimidating gazes, and abruptly leaving the room, signaling the end of the discussion.

In the Chinese version, family relationships still revolve around the authority of the father figure, with Mulan's mother portrayed as subordinate to her husband. Her mother helps him walk, reflecting his frail health. However, the father's aggressive behavior in this version is not tied to gender dynamics as it is in the United States version, but rather to a specific incident where Mulan fights a boy in the village. While in the Disney film, the father's behavior is tied to a moral obligation and dramatized as a key plot point, in the Chinese version, his reaction is less significant in the narrative. Both families exhibit similar dynamics but are portrayed through contrasting cultural lenses.

At this juncture, a distinction arises between Confucian filial piety, intrinsic to the traditional Hua Mulan story, and the values of a Western Judeo-Christian family. In the Western model, the father often asserts authority through force and the fulfillment of family obligations. Conversely, in the Confucian ideal, strength is derived from socially defined dominant roles for men, grounded in a broader societal ideal.

In the Chinese version, gender dynamics within the family remain implicit. The power dynamics tied to gender are present but less overt than in the Western interpretation. Notably, this discussion focuses on how family relationships are portrayed in films, rather than actual dynamics in real-life Judeo-Christian or Confucian families, which are undoubtedly more complex.

In the Chinese version, the father's statement about arranging a family for Mulan if he does not return demonstrates concern for her well-being rather than a desire to avoid social criticism. This aligns with Confucian values, where the father's role as head of the family emphasizes care and relational harmony rather than physical or emotional dominance. By contrast, in the Disney version, family power dynamics are conveyed through aggressive actions by the father figure. For instance, he slams the table and raises his voice to assert his authority, emphasizing a patriarchal model of dominance and control often associated with Judeo-Christian traditions. However, this portrayal does not idealize the father's role as a social model, but instead positions it as a conservative element that Mulan must confront.

The central question here is why there is an insistence on incorporating subtle elements of a conservative Western family to represent a Chinese family. This approach is puzzling, considering the importance of family in Confucian terms within the story and Chinese society itself.

To address this question, parallels can be drawn with Edward W. Said's (1979, p. 310) discussion on Orientalist perceptions of the Arab family:

> "Orientalist generalizations about the Arabs are very detailed when it comes to itemizing Arab characteristics critically, far less so when it comes to analyzing Arab strengths. The Arab family, Arab rhetoric, the Arab character, despite copious descriptions by the Orientalist, appear de-natured, without human potency, even as these same descriptions possess a fullness and depth in their sweeping power over the subject matter."

Said's argument about overly critical portrayals of Arab characteristics resonates with how families are depicted in the two Mulan films. The United States version constructs a traditional and conservative family aligned with Judeo-Christian values, framing it within a gender debate reflective of contemporary Western issues. This could serve two purposes: first, to connect with Western audiences, and second, to downplay distinct Confucian family

dynamics. This generalization universalizes the gender debate using Western terms, consequently erasing significant cultural nuances.

In summary, while numerous other elements could provide further insights into the disparities between the two versions, the analysis based on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism reveals how representations of the East and the "Other" are shaped by stereotypes and preconceived notions, even when superficially similar elements are activated.

When considering Stuart Hall's definition of stereotypes, it becomes evident that maintaining a specific view of the "Other" stems not from ignorance but from the perpetuation of a power dynamic. Stereotypes uphold this dynamic by naturalizing inferiorizing traits, particularly through the attribution of immutability to characteristics deemed "natural." As Hall states, "Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (Hall, 1997, p. 257).

Moreover, stereotyping is not merely a process of simplification but also a mechanism of exclusion that sustains social and symbolic orders. Hall further explains: "Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other'" (Hall, 1997, p. 258). This process confines the "Other" to their "natural" condition of inferiority, reinforcing their inability to alter what is perceived as inherent and maintaining hierarchical power structures.

Both films, despite their similarities, demonstrate how the concept of Orientalism can still be employed to analyze non-Western countries. At the same time, they underscore the influence of the Western worldview on cinematic narratives. Even when the storyline involves other countries and specific cultural elements, these are often overshadowed by the imposition of a dominant perspective on the "Other," dictating the narrative while disregarding authentic perspectives from the native culture.

Such representations, anchored in a multi-million-dollar film industry with vast distribution networks, perpetuate narratives of modernity and progress. These narratives reinforce power dynamics while marginalizing the "Other's" interpretation of their own identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of the two versions of Hua Mulan demonstrates how Orientalism manifests in various aspects of US productions. This influence is evident in the representation of scenes and characters, including visual and cultural elements, as well as nuances in the script and performances. The existence of stereotypes, the oversimplification of Chinese culture, and the omission of relevant historical aspects that provide context for the time period in which the story is set, are fundamental characteristics of the Western perspective in the interpretation of the character and her trajectory.

In the Disney film, there is a clear cultural simplification and an emphasis on stereotypes about the Chinese. This is evident through the portrayal of elements of magic associated with martial arts, decontextualized costumes, and exaggerated makeup. These examples demonstrate the continued presence of simplified and stereotypical representations of Chinese culture in Western cinema. Furthermore, the approach to gender issues follows the patterns of a Western interpretation, shifting the focus from discussions on nationality and familial affection to individual identity.

The emphasis on individualism aligns with Western views of individual heroism, disregarding elements that highlight the importance of collective action in addressing the central conflict. Additionally, the political landscape of China is simplified; the story unfolds in a setting resembling the country's contemporary model, replacing the historical Wei Empire. These elements in the version produced in the United States contribute to a Westernized portrayal of China and the subjectivity of its population, particularly regarding their relationship with the State and the nation.

In contrast, *Matchless Mulan* seeks a closer and more contextualized representation of Chinese culture, distancing itself from the Westernized view of the East. The film addresses gender issues in a more subtle manner, emphasizing collective values in the latter half of the narrative. The Chinese version portrays Hua Mulan's transformation in her perspective on collective responsibility throughout the story. Initially motivated by family concerns, she ultimately realizes that focusing solely on her family does not address the broader issue of war. Instead, the resolution requires the active participation of all individuals in the country to ensure the well-being of families and their members. Moreover, this version maintains a more faithful representation of the historical context, referencing the Wei Empire.

Another significant aspect to consider is the challenge of accessing information about the Chinese adaptations of Hua Mulan, especially those released in 2020. Initial searches on platforms like Bing.com and Google.com yielded an overwhelming amount of information about Disney's 2020 version. Most results directed users to cinema blogs containing critical analyses, trailers, and YouTube clips of the Disney film.

A standard search, similar to that conducted for the United States version, failed to uncover relevant information about the Chinese films, including technical specifications and synopses. Such information was only found through searches conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Additionally, some websites with the ".cn" extension were flagged as security risks by the browser (Edge Beta), further complicating the search process. These issues with accessing information align with the findings of Araujo and Albuquerque (2024), who discuss how Netflix's algorithm reinforces stereotypical views of China in Brazil. Their study highlights how language and cultural context shape audience perceptions, reflecting the broader challenges of global media representation.

All films were eventually located on YouTube, with the Chinese version found on the channel of a Chinese film distributor, 奇大影 *(*IQiyi Movie Theater*)*. However, it was unclear whether the channel was official or unofficial. The existence of Chinese versions of Hua Mulan, produced in the same year as the Disney version, was only confirmed after discovering the aforementioned portal. After finding these films, I began searching for the names of directors and main actors to gather additional information about their works. At this point, a peculiar challenge emerged: in some versions, the main actresses shared the same surname (Lin), further complicating the search results, which were already dominated by information about the Disney version.

Although such challenges do not necessarily indicate deliberate information blocking, they underscore the relevance of access to information in shaping perceptions. The way search engines prioritize and present results influences how we interpret the significance of a subject within a given social context. During my search for the Chinese adaptations, I was surprised to discover multiple new versions of Hua Mulan produced in 2020.

CONCLUSION

This article applied Edward Said's concept of Orientalism to compare two versions of the Hua Mulan films, demonstrating how stereotypes and preconceived ideas shape the portrayal of the "Other" in both Western and Chinese productions. The comparative analysis reveals that, while both films reflect contextual biases, the version produced in the United States reinforces longstanding orientalist tropes by emphasizing individualism and exoticized representations. In contrast, the Chinese version attempts to provide a more nuanced and historically grounded portrayal, prioritizing collectivism and cultural specificity.

The originality of this research lies in its application of Said's framework to contemporary cinematic representations, incorporating insights from cultural studies to explore how Orientalism persists in popular culture through specific cinematic tropes, such as martial arts and depictions of gender dynamics. The analysis contributes to existing debates by illustrating how cinematic narratives are shaped by power dynamics: Western productions, like Disney's *Mulan*, reinforce stereotypes that align with broader geopolitical interests, while Chinese productions, such as *Matchless Mulan*, actively construct self-representations that challenge these external perspectives.

Ultimately, this analysis not only sheds light on the specific case of Hua Mulan, but also underscores the broader implications of how Orientalism continues to shape global perceptions of non-Western cultures. The wide-reaching influence of the United States film industry perpetuates simplified and often distorted images of other societies. By critically examining both films, this study emphasizes the importance of engaging with cultural representations to unpack the narratives they create about the "Other" and the power structures they sustain.

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