

Article

From *Mulan* (1998) to *Mulan* (2020): Disney Conventions, Cross-Cultural Feminist Intervention, and a Compromised Progress

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Abstract: Directed by the feminist filmmaker Niki Caro, Disney's 2020 live-action remake of *Mulan* (1998) strove to be a more gender progressive, culturally appropriate, and internationally successful adaptation of the Chinese legend of *Mulan* than the animated original. Contrary to the film's intended effect, however, it was a critical and financial letdown. The film was criticized for a wide range of issues, including making unpopular changes to the animated original, misrepresenting Chinese culture and history, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes, and demonizing Inner Asian steppe nomads. In addition, the film also faced boycott calls amid political controversies surrounding China. It received exceptionally low audience ratings in both the US and China, grossing a total well under its estimated budget. This article argues that *Mulan* (2020) is not, as many believe, just another Disney film suffering from simple artistic inability, cultural insensitivity, or political injustice, but a window into the tension-ridden intersectionality of the gender, sexual, racial, cultural, and political issues that shape the production and reception of today's cross-cultural films. It discusses three major problems, the Disney problem, the gender problem, and the cultural problem, that *Mulan* (2020) tackled with respectful efforts in Caro's feminist filmmaking pattern. The film made significant compromises between its goals of cultural appropriateness, progressive feminism, and monetary success. Although it eventually failed to satisfactorily resolve these at times conflicting missions, it still achieved important progress in addressing some serious gender and cultural problems in *Mulan*'s contemporary intertextual metamorphosis, especially those introduced by the Disney animation. By revealing *Mulan* (2020)'s value and defects, this article intends to flesh out some real-world challenges that feminist movements must overcome to effectively transmit messages and bring about changes at the transcultural level in the arts.

Keywords: *Mulan*; Disney; Orientalism; Niki Caro; feminism



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1. Introduction

In 1998, Disney released the animated film *Mulan*, which is inspired by a legend that probably originated from the *Ballad of Mulan* in the Northern Wei, a dynasty ruling northern China between the 4th and the 6th centuries CE. The film tells a story of *Mulan* (voiced by Ming-Na Wen), a girl who impersonates a man and joins the army in place of her drafted ailing father (voiced by Soon-Tek Oh). She fights bravely and intelligently, eventually saving her Chinese kingdom from the villain Shan Yu (voiced by Miguel Ferrer) and his invading army.

In terms of both gender and cultural representations, *Mulan* was a breakthrough for Disney. Although still called a “princess” for marketing reasons, *Mulan* departed from the Disney princess cliché not only in that she is unrelated to any royal or notable family, but also in that she is a valiant and resourceful savior rather than an adorable girl waiting for a Prince Charming's deliverance. As Disney's first Asian hero, *Mulan* also felt like “a life raft” to young Chinese-American theater-goers who had only ever seen Asian characters portrayed marginally and discriminatively in the Hollywood-dominated media landscape (Mei 2018).

These improvements were made in the context of the third-wave feminism movement, which originated in the “riot grrrl” punk subculture of the early 1990s. As summarized by Martha Rampton, “[t]he ‘grrrls’ of the third wave stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, [. . .] defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy.” “Grrrl-feminism tends to be global, multi-cultural, and it [. . .] breaks boundaries” (Rampton 2018). Bikini Kill, the all-woman punk band that pioneered the “riot grrrl” movement, published a zine titled “Girl Power” in 1991. Later popularized by the Spice Girls, a British girl group formed in 1994, the term led to a “Girl Power” movement that reshaped the Western pop culture. With *Mulan*, Disney successfully joined the changing tide. Yet *Mulan* is only a feminist success relative to the low bar set by Disney’s previous “princess” films, and those improvements it does make are restricted by the media conglomerate’s strong conventions. The film is still filled with gender biases as well as cultural appropriation and stereotypes.

In 2017, nearly two decades after the release of *Mulan*, Disney chose Niki Caro to direct a live-action remake of the animated film. This was certainly a choice for good reasons. Caro is a well-established film auteur influenced by the third-wave feminist movements. Her signature filmmaking approach features cross-cultural feminist intervention with a respectful attitude toward the represented cultures. Her films have also enjoyed moderate box-office success on US and international markets, including *McFarland, USA* (2015), which she directed for Disney.

But the remake, released in 2020, was a critical and financial letdown. The film was widely criticized for its departure from the animated original in the US. It received a “cold shoulder” in China allegedly for its “mixture of oriental elements and symbols in the eyes of Westerners” (Song and Xie 2020). It also faced boycott calls amid political controversies regarding China. Receiving exceptionally low audience ratings in both the US and China, the film was “one of the very lowest-grossing Disney remakes/revamps since *Alice in Wonderland*” (Mendelson 2020). Globally, the film grossed an estimated total of \$126–156 million, which was well under its reported budget of \$200 million.¹

This article provides a comparative reading of the creation and reception of *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan* (2020), as well as Caro’s two other representative works, *North Country* (2005) and *Whale Rider* (2002). As revealed in the comparison, *Mulan* (2020) follows Caro’s usual pattern of filmmaking in its two objectives: First, to bring progressive feminist ideas into mainstream culture despite market pressures and filmmaking conventions; and second, to assimilate stories from local cultures (usually not her own) into a “universal” feminist theme beyond cultural specificities. While the remake of *Mulan* embodied a decent effort in reaching both objectives, which Caro had more successfully achieved before, it eventually failed for being caught among Disney’s entrenched conventions, China’s complex history and culture, and the conflict-ridden contemporary political context that significantly affected the effectiveness of a cross-cultural feminist message based upon a Chinese story. Therefore, I argue that *Mulan* (2020) is not, as many believe, just another Disney film suffering from simple artistic inability, cultural insensitivity, or political injustice. It is rather a window into the tension-ridden intersectionality of the gender, sexual, racial, cultural, and political issues that shape production and reception of today’s cross-cultural films. In particular, this article discusses three major problems, the Disney problem, the gender problem, and the cultural problem, that *Mulan* (2020) tackles with respectful efforts but unfortunately fails to resolve, fleshing out some real-world challenges that feminist movements must overcome to effectively transmit messages and bring about changes at the transcultural level in the arts.

2. The Disney Problem

As Paul Wells points out, the name of Disney is “a metonym for an authorially complex, hierarchical industrial process, which organizes and executes selective practices within the vocabularies of animated film” (Wells 2002a, p. 140, *Italics original*). In other words, Disney is a peculiar combination of authorship and genre.

Individual authorship, or the concept of auteur, is particularly problematic in the industry of animated films, which are usually produced by a large and diverse team of creative workers in a manner akin to a compartmentalized assembly line. For many, however, it seems easy to attribute Disney's animated films to one single "auteur." During the lifetime of Walt Disney (1901–1966), who co-founded the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, "many customers thought Walt drew all the cartoons himself" (Griffin 2000, p. 141). Most of today's audience still view Disney films as being single-handedly created by an "auteuristic autonomous industry" by the name of Disney (Harrington 2014, p. 29). Little attention has been paid to the actual director(s) of each Disney film, let alone the entire creative team. In the words of Chris Pallant, this "oversimplified appreciation of Disney authorship" is a product of Disney's hierarchical production mode privileging Walt Disney and his legacy as the ultimate "extra-textual auteur," as well as Disney's self-claimed "parentage of animation as an art form" popularly promoted under its control over distribution, marketing, criticism, and research (Pallant 2011, pp. x, 4, 5).

Disney's peculiarity in terms of genre can be understood through Rick Altman's differentiation between the concepts of cycle and genre. According to Altman, genrification is a circular process. If a film becomes lucrative, its studio will often try to "[assay] and [imitate] [its] money-making qualities" in a cycle of new films in order to repeat the success. A cycle's success, however, can often lead to the end of its life because it will attract other studios to imitate. Once there are enough imitations from other studios, a single studio's proprietary cycle will develop into an industry-wide genre, which is no longer beneficial to the studio's exclusive interest and competitive edge. (Altman 1999, pp. 59–62). Yet Disney has been exceptionally effective in preventing the successes of its cycles from becoming non-proprietary and sharable. The above-mentioned popular image of Disney as a singular "auteur" plays a key role in this effectiveness. Disney began to build this image through the creation of its mascot Mickey Mouse in 1928 precisely because Walt Disney learned a hard lesson from losing the benefits of his prior cartoon character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, to other studios (Pallant 2011, p. ix). Today, the Disney brand has developed into such an overarching and overshadowing aura that "Disney" is often recognized as a film "genre" in both popular and scholarly discourses (e.g., Harrington 2014, p. 70; Wood 2020). While naming a genre with a brand constitutes an oxymoron that declares a public category proprietary, the term "Disney genre" is ironically accurate in reflecting the general tendency to read Disney films "with coherence and consistency, over-riding all the creative diversity, production processes, socio-cultural influences and historical conditions" inherent in their creation (Wells 2002b, p. 76).

Much tension, therefore, can be seen in live-action remakes of Disney's animated films because these films are often where Disney's exceptionally strong institutional authorship and generic conventions meet well-established individual film auteurs. The tension is an important reason that the remakes by such famous filmmakers as Tim Burton (*Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Dumbo* (2019)), Jon Favreau (*The Jungle Book* (2016), *The Lion King* (2019)), Guy Ritchie (*Aladdin* (2019)), and Joachim Rønning (*Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019)) are often controversial in the US. *Rotten Tomatoes*, a major US-based review-aggregation website, allots "rotten" (under 60 out of 100) critic scores to all of these films, and some "rotten" audience scores as well.

Much more well-received than these films, Caro's first Disney film, *McFarland, USA* earns a critic score of 80 and an audience score of 88 at *Rotten Tomatoes*. This success can be attributed to two factors. One, *McFarland, USA* is an original live-action film instead of a remake, and therefore does not need to take on the difficult task to satisfy those preconceived expectations based on a beloved Disney animated classic. Two, Caro chose to cautiously adhere to existing conventions of the Disney sports film sub-genre, including the underdog plot formula and the theme of feel-good racial reconciliation seen in such films as *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Full-Court Miracle* (2003), *Going to the Mat* (2004), *Miracle* (2004), *The Greatest Game Ever Played* (2005), *Glory Road* (2006), *Invincible* (2006), and those in *The Mighty Ducks* franchise. Her feminist authorship is almost undetectable in this formulaic

film: All female characters are minor characters, and the most visible female character is just a cliché-ridden romantic trophy for a male underdog character. The film marked a cooperation with, rather than an intervention into, the Disney authorship and genre.

As Caro mentions in a New Zealand Film Commission interview, the success of *McFarland, USA* was an important reason that Disney chose her for the remake of *Mulan* (Caro 2019). This time, however, it soon became clear that Caro would not just make another typical Disney film. Upon the release of the remake's first teaser in July 2019, upset US fans of the original animated film took to Twitter to express their frustration. "This does not feel like a Disney movie," one user wrote, "I don't see Mushu, cricket, Yao, Chien [Po], Ling, [Li] Shang, and singing." All these characters missing from the teaser are archetypical Disney figures in the original animated film. As another user commented, the relationship between Mulan and Mushu, a pint-sized "Chinese" dragon, is just "like Pinocchio & Jiminy Cricket" (Preston 2019). But the animated film still cannot help but give Mulan an actual cricket as another companion. Yao, Chien Po, and Ling, Mulan's three comrades in arms, are one of Disney's many comedic character trios. And Li Shang is Mulan's commander, love interest, and an official Disney prince.²

Such tension has increased since the release of the full film. In fact, the full film does include most of the animated film's characters, including the trio and the cricket (as a fellow soldier of Mulan rather than an actual cricket). However, many US reviewers still complain that the animated film's important strengths, especially that of "a strong female lead," are disturbingly absent from the remake (Dahagam 2020). In one reviewer's eyes, for example, whereas the animated film features an inspirational "teenage coming-of-age story" of how Mulan develops from an average girl into a heroine, Mulan in the remake relies on *qi*, a nearly supernatural power, that she acquires from a young age. She does not develop her own abilities but rather subjugates herself to Confucian filial piety and her family, and thus "denies [her own] individuality" (Olechnowicz 2020). *Mulan* (2020)'s *Rotten Tomatoes* ratings seem to support one critic's view that the film just continues Disney's "insufferable series of live-action adaptations of animated classics" (Barnes 2020). While well-arranged cinematography and action choreography have saved the "freshness" of the film's critic score, its audience score, 48, is only equal to that of *Dumbo*, the most "rotten" of all the aforementioned Disney remakes.

Caro's feminist intervention into the *Mulan* franchise was a main reason that her remake "does not feel like a Disney movie" to many. As analyzed in next section, the intervention follows a strategic pattern that she has established since her first Hollywood film *North Country* (2005). On the one hand, the pattern embodies important auteuristic and generic changes based upon feminist ideas that promote women's dignity, agency, and unity. On the other hand, the pattern is also filled with compromises that aim to make her films palatable to conventional Hollywood. On the platform of usual Hollywood genres, Caro's strategy has helped her feminist ideas, considered by many as "radical," make their way into the mainstream culture through films like *North Country*. The same strategy, however, did not succeed in overcoming the much stronger resistance of the conventions of Disney, the peculiar combination of authorship and genre.

3. The Gender Problem

When making *North Country*, Caro had just transitioned from the New Zealand film industry to Hollywood. As she describes in an interview, this transition was a "very sobering" gendered experience for her:

I came into filmmaking at a time in New Zealand politically where the three highest positions in office, the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice, and the Governor-General, were all female. So it was very natural for me to be a filmmaker, and many of my peers were female. Coming now to base myself in the United States is like leaping back in time. I've found it very sobering the lack of women in this industry, and it's a very important conversation to have and to keep having until that parity is restored. (Caro 2017)

Not coincidentally, *North Country* is a film about a female worker's struggle for justice in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by men. The film was inspired by the legal case of *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Company*, widely known as the first class-action sexual harassment lawsuit in the US. Lois Jenson, the case's primary plaintiff, began working as a miner at Eveleth Mines Forbes Fairlane Plant in the Mesabi Iron Range in northeastern Minnesota in 1975, less than a year after the US steel industry had to begin formally hiring women in its mines following a consent decree with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.³ An extreme minority, Jenson and her female co-workers were seen as both an unwelcomed threat and sexual objects by many male miners. The hostile work environment and continuous sexual harassment forced Jenson to file a union grievance in 1984. She met vicious retaliation for the grievance but received no meaningful help from the management, the union, or the public lawyer assigned to represent her. In 1988, having been refused by fifty attorneys, Jenson finally found one private lawyer, Paul Sprenger, to represent her legal case. Sprenger built multiple similar claims together and turned the case into a class action. The case reached a confidential winning settlement for the plaintiffs after a decade of what one judge described as "long, tortured, and unfortunate history" (*Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.* 1997). It eventually reshaped the law as a seminal sexual harassment case, but also cost Jenson physical and mental health. She and her fellow plaintiffs endured a re-traumatizing litigation, deprivation of privacy, safety threats, slanders, humiliation, ostracism, and strained relationships with friends, family, and even each other. She suffered severe post-traumatic stress disorder, which resulted in "a permanent impairment in her ability to trust and build effective or close relationships with people, especially men, on a vocational or personal and social level" (Bingham and Gansler 2002, p. 288).⁴

However, *North Country* avoided depicting much of Jenson's all-too-real and all-too-painful ordeal, choosing instead to present a significantly romanticized legal fight. The film's protagonist Josey Aimes (Charlize Theron) prevails over statutory rape, domestic violence, workplace hostility, sexual harassment, retaliation, and vilification with the support of a dedicated lawyer (Woody Harrelson), a close friend Glory (Frances McDormand), and her family. The film culminates in a dramatic courtroom victory that vindicates Josey, rallies a plaintiff unity, and turns the case into a class action lawsuit.

The differences between the actual legal case and its dramatization in *North Country* attracted such criticism of the latter as "embarrassingly sophomoric [...] and dismissive of the real dimensions of the lives of female whistle-blowers like Lois Jenson" (Garcia 2005). Critics have noted that the dramatization followed a generic Hollywood pattern of the "good finally triumphs over evil" myth (Korzec 2007; Kamir 2009).

There is indeed a valid perspective in the criticism of *North Country*'s Hollywood-style romanticization of events. As Orit Kamir points out, however, such criticism overlooks that Caro also "implement[ed] unconventional references to familiar Hollywood [generic] formulas." First, Caro made sure to feature Josey as the main hero of the film, whereas Josey's male lawyer, who would occupy the spotlight in a conventional Hollywood legal drama, is no more than a facilitator of her fight. The film also moved beyond viewers' generic expectations of a woman protagonist punished "for her hubris" by "the superior power of 'fate'" (woman's/maternal melodrama films in the early 20th century and their "soap opera" descendants), "trapped in the vicious cycle of domestic violence" (battered wives films since the mid-1980s), and seeking just personal vengeance for sexual violence (sexual victims films in the 1980s and the 1990s). Instead, it created a new generic mix, taking elements from two established types of Hollywood social hero films: those featuring female blue collar activists (e.g., *Norma Rae* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983), and *Erin Brockovich* (2000)) and those characterizing honorable legal fights for civil rights (e.g., *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)). In doing so, *North Country* departed from the usual Hollywood depiction of sexual/domestic violence survivors as merely victims or lone avengers, but characterizing them as agents fighting structural injustice and gendered oppression together (Kamir 2009, pp. 121, 128–42).

Caro made a very similar feminist intervention into the *Mulan* franchise. First, she made sure to feature Mulan as the main hero of her remake, not letting a male character take away her spotlight in the usual Disney way. This was an important reason for the removal of Mushu from the story. Voiced by the comedian Eddie Murphy, Mushu is a constantly-talking and self-absorbed male dragon who overconfidently appoints himself as the guardian of Mulan. As a comedy routine essential in Disney's filmmaking formula, Mushu's performance is well-received by many viewers, who find that male confidence can still be adorable and even admirable no matter how reckless or unearned. His endless stream of uninvited and useless instructions to Mulan not only directs the audience's attention away from Mulan, but also ironically fills this supposedly "Girl Power" film with childish mansplaining, a practice for which Caro expresses her disdain in numerous interviews (e.g., [Caro 2019](#)). Of course, the official explanation Caro gives for the removal of Mushu is polite. She claims that the remake had to commit to a live-action "realism" in which the animated Mushu would not fit, and that it was a "challenge" to bring Mushu's "humor and levity" to "Mulan's real relationships with her fellow soldiers" ([Caro 2020](#)).

The commitment to realism, however, cannot explain why the remake still features an animated magic figure, a female phoenix, as Mulan's guardian. How the phoenix differs from the Mushu dragon is quite telling: She appears only when Mulan needs her guidance, is maternally supportive and silent, and gives Mulan the strength to endure and the space to express herself. Caro is more straightforward when comparing the symbols of dragon and phoenix: "The dragon is representative of the masculine, and the phoenix is representative of the feminine" ([Rice 2020](#)).⁵

When depicting "Mulan's real relationships with her fellow soldiers," the remake departs from the animated film's "teenage coming-of-age story," which writes Mulan's character arc in Disney's tried, tested, yet also cliché-ridden "underdog" plot formula. As mentioned above, this departure upset reviewers. Their expectation had been shaped by the animated film, where Mulan begins her journey into the male-dominated military world as a weak, clueless, and clumsy girl. She must learn from her fellow soldiers and the commander Li Shang in order to behave and fight in a "manly" way. The remake changes Mulan from a girl of mediocre physical ability into a natural-born *qi* wielder. It opens with the following voiceover of Mulan's father, who expresses both amazement and concern for his daughter's talent:

Here she is. A young shoot, all green, unaware of the blade. If you had such a daughter, her *qi*, the boundless energy of life itself, speaking through her every motion, could you tell her that only a son could wield *qi*? That a daughter would risk shame, dishonor, exile? Ancestors, I could not.

In the remake, therefore, the challenge for Mulan is no longer how to acquire power through a training by men and for men. It is rather how a talented woman can thrive or just survive in a world that does not allow feminine power, a gender imparity not unlike what Caro has experienced herself. She once remarked that the male-dominated Hollywood tends to tell young female filmmakers to distrust and conceal their "feminine parts," including the abilities to communicate, to multitask, to look after other people, and to be compassionate, despite the fact that these are actually "gold" for their profession ([Caro 2017](#)).

Having changed this basic setting, the remake reshapes Mulan's relationships with her fellow soldiers. Unlike in the animated film, she does not begin as a weak and timid novice who is afraid of Yao and Ling, the two bullies in the comedic trio, but as an able and confident equal to them. She does not need Mushu's "humor and levity," as she brings her own sense of humor into her interactions with fellow soldiers and never cracks jokes inappropriately. Cricket is no longer a close companion of Mulan but her mirror image in terms of non-conformity with gender stereotypes: He is a tender, sensitive, and feminine man.

Such new relationships offer no place for a character like Li Shang because his charm on Mulan is based on a stereotypical, misogynistic, and rigid masculinity. In the animated

film, the scene where Mulan peeps at Li Shang's muscles in awe and fascination is also where he uses his commanding authority to insult her, other soldiers, and women in general: "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons? [. . .] You're a spineless, pale, pathetic lot! [. . .] How could I make a man out of you?" When Li Shang finds out that Mulan is a woman, he almost kills her and then abandons her in the snow even though she has just saved him and all of their fellow soldiers. Yet Mulan still cannot help but follow him and save him once again. When Li Shang is eventually convinced that he and his soldiers should sneak in the imperial palace with Mulan to help the emperor, he does not join his comrades when they masquerade as women to defeat the enemy. This exception is for no better reason than maintaining Li Shang's masculine and authoritative image: the primary driver of his personality without which his generic romantic tension with Mulan would be impossible. Like Mushu's mansplaining, this was another ironically conservative gender and power bias even at the time when the animated film still played a progressive role in the "Girl Power" movement. It can feel even more uncomfortable today amid the awareness raised by the #MeToo movement, which itself began in the male-dominated Hollywood.⁶

The remake replaces Li Shang with three different characters: Sergeant Qiang, Commander Tung, and Honghui. Inheriting Li Shang's rigid masculinity, Qiang is the one who is supposed to "make a man out of" the soldiers with hierarchical authority, stern attitudes, and harsh penalties.⁷ However, even Qiang is different from Li Shang in that he does not insult his soldiers. Neither does Tung, Li Shang's counterpart in terms of commanding authority. He treats soldiers respectfully, including and especially Mulan after he recognizes her talent. Honghui, Mulan's love interest in the remake, begins impressing her not with his muscles, but by helping her rebut Yao's gender stereotypes. Replacing Li Shang with these three characters marks a feminist departure from the original story's gendered imaginations of workplace and romance.

Adding to this departure significantly, the remake replaces Hayabusa the Falcon, Shan Yu's simply vicious and apparently male pet (vocal effects by Frank Welker), with Xianniang (Gong Li), a female witch who can shapeshift into a falcon. Appearing first as Mulan's enemy, Xianniang is revealed to be the same as Mulan in that they are both talented women forbidden to reveal their power. For disobeying this prohibition, Xianniang is demonized, ostracized, and left with no other choice but to serve Böri Khan (Shan Yu's counterpart in the remake), who uses her as a fighting machine without dignity. The shared predicament of Xianniang and Mulan indicates that gender oppression exists across different (including apparently antagonistic) cultures. Therefore, it is a key moment in the remake that Xianniang offers her understanding and invitation to a devastated Mulan, who has just been expelled from the army after revealing that she is a woman:

The more power I showed, the more I was crushed, just like you. [. . .] Merge your path with mine. We will be stronger together. [. . .] Join me. We will take our place together.

If Mulan accepted this invitation, the remake would head in the same direction that Caro has attempted before: characterizing women, either Josey and Glory in *North Country* or Mulan and Xianniang in *Mulan*, as agents fighting structural injustice and gendered oppression together. But that would also be a fundamental breakaway from the animated film, in which Mulan dedicatedly saves Li Shang and the emperor without even a chance to meet a fellow woman like Xianniang. Following the pattern of Caro's Hollywood filmmaking, the remake does not choose the more radical path, but reaches a middle ground with both progressive changes and compromises. This in-between position is epitomized in Mulan's refusal to Xianniang: "I know my place, and it is my duty to fight for the kingdom and protect the emperor."

On the one hand, the "place" with which Mulan identifies seems to embody a hope for gender equality thanks to the new changes to the Disney story. Along with the replacement of male characters, the remake has also changed the reason for which the army expels Mulan. Unlike the animated film, where Mulan's very existence as a woman is punishable

by death in the misogynistic army, the remake presents her identity deception, a violation of the army's honesty code, as what triggers the expulsion. To clarify that this honesty code is not a gender discrimination, the remake adds an incident in which a male soldier cheats in training and receives the same punishment. Moreover, when Mulan returns to the army trying to save the kingdom, she is not treated like her animated counterpart, who has to face the hostile male authority, Li Shang, desperately asking: "You said you'd trust Ping [her male pseudonym]. Why is Mulan any different?" Instead, Mulan is supported by all the male soldiers and especially Honghui, who asks Tung the same question for her. These male allies of Mulan convince Tung to let Mulan lead them. To Mulan, this is "proof that there is a place for people like [Xianniang and herself]" in the kingdom, and therefore fighting for the kingdom is a "noble path."

On the other hand, however, the "noble path" is but a series of duties to fight for increasingly higher level of male authorities until the emperor (Jet Li). In this remake that discards Mushu the little dragon, it is ironic to see that Mulan's ultimate task is to save the emperor, whose imperial power is symbolized by all kinds of dragons decorating his seat, robe, and armor. Like Mushu, the emperor is overconfident. Facing Böri Khan, he makes an incredibly reckless move and instantly falls into a trap. Also like Mushu, he cannot stop giving uninvited and useless instructions. Even when he is all tied up and can only wait for Mulan to rescue him, he still speaks to her in a commanding tone and offers such empty words as "fight for the kingdom and its people!". This typical mansplaining almost makes the climactic fighting scene comedic, yet it is presented as a seriously inspiring message for Mulan. In order to maintain the emperor's masculine and authoritative image, the fight is also choreographed in such a way that Mulan must first untie the emperor, let him make a last-minute rescue of himself by catching an approaching arrow, and then take the arrow from him to finish a fatal blow to Böri Khan. Moreover, the emperor certainly does not see Xianniang and Mulan as the same. The former woman is a threat to his power, and therefore a "witch" to exile and destroy. The latter woman is a protection of his power, and therefore a "warrior" to award. The "place in the kingdom" where Mulan ultimately feels at home is subject to the patriarch's recognition and integral to his power and authority.

Despite its position somewhere between radical feminism and generic Hollywood tropes, the remake did not adequately bend to Disney conventions for many US viewers to accept it. It did not encounter the same problem in mainland China, where Disney's institutional authorship and generic conventions were not as entrenched. As the next section discusses, however, it met another kind of resistance due to its alleged distortions of Chinese culture. This resistance is familiar to both Disney and Caro as both the animated *Mulan* and *Whale Rider* (2002), Caro's best-known early work made in New Zealand, have met similar critiques.

4. The Cultural Problem

The animated *Mulan* failed when it was theatrically released in China in 1999. Chinese viewers referred to Disney's *Mulan* as a "yang Mulan" ("foreign Mulan"). In their eyes, she was "too individualistic," "too self-aggrandizing," "too American," and did not exhibit such defining characteristics of the Chinese Mulan as the Confucian "values of modesty," "community," and "filial piety" (Langfitt 1999). Many critics and scholars disapproved of the film for its "Orientalist view" and "disrespectful attitude" towards Chinese culture (e.g., Mo and Shen 2000; Djao 2002; Sun 2003; Wang and Yeh 2005; Mouzakis 2019).

These are valid critiques of the film's perpetuation of Western supremacy under the façade of feminism. As Jing Yin points out, the animated *Mulan* "shelters the gender hierarchy in Western society through dissolving it into the racial/cultural hierarchy" and "attributing gender injustice to the overall formation of non-Western cultures." Its "feminist" story is ironically "non-threatening to white male audiences" because it "subjugates gender oppression through portraying it as a culturally specific problem, that is, a Chinese problem" (Yin 2014, p. 293).

It is small wonder that the “Chinese problem” portrayed in the animated *Mulan* is a Disney invention. Examples of this invention are numerous, including the above-mentioned scene where Mulan is found out to be a woman. In this scene, Mulan is dragged out from her sick bed inside a camp, thrown to snowy ground with no proper clothes on, and reviled as a “treacherous snake.” A furious Li Shang is about to kill her. That her bravery and wisdom have just saved the entire platoon, including Li Shang, is barely enough to spare her life at the last moment. The platoon then just abandons Mulan, who kneels in the snow, lonely, helpless, and hopeless. All of this ungrateful, cruel, and barbaric treatment of Mulan is but for one reason: a “Chinese” law that views woman’s participation in the army as “high treason” and “ultimate dishonor.” The Mulan in the original Chinese *Ballad of Mulan*, however, must not have heard about this law. Otherwise she would not happily reveal her gender to comrades-in-arms when returning home from the army. Obviously having no idea about this law, either, those comrades-in-arms do nothing other than feel surprised. The ballad then ends with a proud Mulan metaphorically stating that men and women are equal in terms of their capacities, although they may look different:

*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?*⁸

Of course, the ballad is far from the only Chinese version of Mulan’s legend. The Chinese hypotext of the legend is a millennium-long accumulation of vastly diverse representations of Mulan. The “Confucian values” of Mulan, mentioned above by the animated film’s Chinese audience, are actually additions in those later versions that often remove the ballad’s message about gender equality (Wang 2020b). However, there is one consistency among the multifarious Chinese versions: Far from a crime, joining the army to save her father is what makes Mulan an extraordinary woman, and this extraordinariness is the common basis on which Mulan is shaped and re-shaped into role models for different moral values of different times. Moreover, no later Chinese version is nearly as popular as the household ballad, and the hare metaphor has always been the ballad’s most memorable moment for generations of Chinese people. The actual Chinese culture also has a long tradition of legendizing other female military heroes. It is utterly different from the Disney invention.

Together with the “Chinese problem,” the 1998 film also creates a “Chinese” audio-visual feast. The feast is an anachronistic and anachronistic mixture of both Chinese and Western elements spanning over 2000 years of history, including the Han-Xiongnu War (133 BCE to 89 CE), Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907) costumes, the kind of firearms and fireworks that did not exist until the Song Dynasty (CE 960–1279), the emperor’s palace in the style of the Ming and the Qing dynasties (CE 1368–1912), the Huns, girdles, and modern newspaper.⁹ Its intended palatability for a Western audience is epitomized in a scene where Cricket is supposed to write an official letter. While it should be easy for Disney to prepare something more like a proper letter in Chinese, what appears on the stationery is a nonsensical combination of such miswritten Chinese characters as “crispy,” “fragrant,” “General Tso,” “Kung Pao,” and “Hunan.” The “letter” is much closer to a menu of the American-imagined “Chinese” food or the incoherent “Chinese” script tattoos popular in the West. Chinese writing in this scene, and indeed Chinese culture in this film, is meant to be culturally appropriated and consumed as an exotic product.

The combination of the “Chinese” visual feast and the “Chinese problem” reflects a typical Orientalist imagination. It flattens and distorts Chinese culture into a static, ahistorical entity that is both beautiful and backward. In this setting, the animated film unsurprisingly features contemporary Western mainstream values, including individualism and self-realization, as what emancipates Mulan’s beautiful “true self” from the backward, if not barbaric, “Chinese” restrictions. No wonder, then, that she appeared *yang* to Chinese audiences.

In Disney's long history of cultural appropriation and racial stereotyping, the animated *Mulan* is but one example among many others, such as *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Aristocats* (1970), *Aladdin* (1992), and *Pocahontas* (1995). This problem is so obvious that Disney has even begun to warn viewers about racist stereotypes in its own films (Frodsham 2020). More recent Disney productions do involve more careful consultations with anthropologists, historians, linguists, and local people for cultural appropriateness. Yet the improvements are still limited and restricted by Disney's strong conventions. The 2016 film *Moana*, for example, still drew criticism from the South Pacific, where the story is set, for perpetuating stereotypical images of Polynesia and Polynesians (Perry 2016; Rocky 2016; Mouzakis 2019).

It was in this context that Disney hired Caro to direct the remake of *Mulan* in 2017. Disney was looking for someone who could do a better job in cross-cultural filmmaking for its international market, and Caro's record in this regard was strong. *McFarland, USA*, her successful first-time cooperation with Disney, features a Latino community. She also gained international acclaim for directing *Whale Rider*, a Māori story, as a Pākehā (a white New Zealander as opposed to a Māori person) filmmaker. Moreover, *Whale Rider* bears similarities to *Mulan* in that its protagonist Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is also an extraordinary girl who earns a leadership role that is reserved for men.

In terms of its attitude toward the represented culture, however, *Whale Rider* clearly differs from the animated *Mulan*. Far from presenting an anachronistic and anachronistic mixture of nonsensical elements, *Whale Rider* depicts Māori cultural specificity with "scrupulous care," "showing a range of cultural practices [. . .] all rendered with realistic detail" (Fox 2017, p. 153). Rather than perpetuating stereotypes of "repressive" non-Western cultures, *Whale Rider* roots Paikea's heroism in complex relationships inherent in her culture, which both presents her with obstacles and imbues her with strengths. A central figure in these relationships is Paikea's grandfather, the village leader Koro (Rawiri Paratene). In most of the film, he firmly believes that only a man can inherit his leadership, and therefore constantly suppresses Paikea's attempt to do so. At the same time, however, he also has an affectionate bond with Paikea and is the source of her inspiration, strength, and skills. This kind of double-sided relationship can also be seen in *North Country*, especially between Josey and her father Hank (Richard Jenkins). The shared pattern between these two films indicates an attitude of equality toward non-Western and Western cultures.

Yet there are also critical voices arguing that *Whale Rider* is "a distortion and misrepresentation of the Māori world" (Ka'ai 2005, p. 12) because "Caro implants into the story a feminist vision of female emancipation drawn from globalized western culture at large" (Fox 2017, p. 154). Here "the story" refers to the film's hypotext: the 1987 novel *Whale Rider* written by the Māori author Witi Ihimaera. In the critics' eyes, the most offensive change that Caro makes to the novel is a radicalization of Kahu (the protagonist's name in the novel) into Paikea, who repeatedly breaches the *tapu* (prohibitions) in Māori culture. For example, in a scene of *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremony), Paikea performs the *karanga* (call) in the *marae ātea* (the courtyard in front of the main house in the traditional Māori complexes) at the request of her grandmother Nanny Flowers (Vicky Haughton). She then insists on sitting on the *paepae* (orators' bench), the front row of seats reserved for men, despite Koro's angry disapproval. She breaches the *tapu* twice here, as explained by Tania M. Ka'ai:

The *marae ātea* is recognised as being the domain of Tūmatauenga, the God of warfare and people. The female role in this context is assigned to the *karanga* [. . .] which in traditional society was executed by a *kuia* (elderly woman) because she had more often than not finished her child-bearing days. This role was not given to young women for fear that *kanga* [curses] would be placed on their *whare tangata* [womb], leaving them barren, thus extinguishing a genealogical line in the *whanau* [family].

This traditional cultural practice was distorted in the film, as Paikea was invited by her grandmother to perform the *karanga*. This is simply inconceivable in Māori society, for her grandmother was exposing her to the risk of *kanga*. [. . .]

Furthermore, Paikea behaved as if she was a child brought up by her father in Germany, with no knowledge of Māori culture, when she sat on the front pew with the men. A child raised by her grandparents would simply not behave in this way. This is an example of the Eurocentric feminist belief that women can challenge a supposed male hegemonic practice that appears to discriminate against Māori women and, therefore, relegates them to lesser positions in Māori society. The disregard for the cultural significance of the *marae* and the protection of women is masked by this Eurocentric feminist challenge, thus portraying Māori as a ‘barbaric’ people who have no respect for women. (Ka’ai 2005, pp. 5, 7, 8)

Such critiques are apparently similar to those of the animated *Mulan*, yet there is one key difference. While the animated *Mulan* fabricates a “Chinese” tradition to attack, the film *Whale Rider* depicts the Māori cultural practice accurately, only interpreting it differently from the more traditional view. It is worth noting that Caro’s Pākehā identity adds a significant amount of sensitivity to her interpretation of and challenge to Māori tradition. The same voices criticizing Caro’s film usually approve of Ihimaera’s novel because the latter is seen to be written “*within* a Māori tribal perspective, not created by the superimposition of alien values imported from a different culture and imposed upon the Māori one from without” (Fox 2017, p. 152, italics original).

However, Paikea’s disobedient behavior encouraged by Nanny Flowers in the film is actually quite consistent with the novel’s depiction of how Kahu is raised by the grandmother, who likes telling her children how her cousin Mihi stands up and argues against a male chief on a sacred ground, where women are supposed to neither stand nor speak (Ihimaera 1987, pp. 64–65). Nanny Flower is also never afraid of confronting Koro, making declarations like:

“I know [the exclusion of women is a rule], but rules are made to be broken.”

“Girls can do anything these days. Haven’t you heard you’re not allowed to discriminate against women anymore? They should put you in the jailhouse.” (Ihimaera 1987, pp. 32, 63)

Without such an attitude toward some of the old rules, Ihimaera would probably not have written *Whale Rider*, which refers to both a legendary male ancestor and, inconceivably in the tradition, what the young female protagonist eventually becomes. In fact, *Whale Rider* is only a modest representation of Ihimaera’s resistance to some traditional values. His later novels, such as *The Uncle’s Story* (2000), about Māori patriarchal suppression of homosexuality, may read more aggressive in this regard.

Moreover, it is questionable if there exists a clear boundary between the “within” and the “without.” As Brendan Hokowhitu points out, the Māori patriarchal “tradition” is in fact a colonial product, or “a hybridized form of elite Māori masculinity” molded by not only indigenous concepts and values but also “British dominance and Māori deference.” This is why “Koro embodies many of the characteristics of a nineteenth-century British patriarch” (Hokowhitu 2008, p. 124). What appears “within” Māori culture may actually be filled with imprints of colonialism, thereby bearing connections and similarities to the Western gender hierarchies “without.” The connections and similarities may well produce connected and similar resistance across the porous border between the “within” and the “without.” While it was probably indeed inconceivable for a young girl to breach the *tapu* of *pōwhiri* in 2005, when Ka’ai published her critique of *Whale Rider*, it has become not only conceivable but also doable now thanks to changes initiated from within Māori culture by those who believe that some *tapu* are outdated and sexist despite the reasoning of protection. On Waitangi Day in 2014, for example, a young Māori girl and two other Māori women spoke during the *pōwhiri* at Te Tii *marae*. This practice breached the *tapu* forbidding/protecting females from speaking in *pōwhiri*, a custom that seems Māori but actually also embodies colonial and Christian values. This change, according to Metiria

Turei, one of the speaking women, “proved the Māori cultural process was ever evolving and was meeting new ways of thinking” (McLachlan 2014).

In light of this perspective, *Whale Rider*’s problem is not its “alien” intervention, but rather its failure to reveal the connections between the hierarchies inside and outside the Māori culture in its specific postcolonial context. While the novel is an intertwined story of the Māori community’s concrete struggle in the global racial hierarchy and that of Kahu in the local gender hierarchy, the film abstracts the Māori village into “a circumscribed, self-contained social space” without any specific political context, assimilating Paiea’s story into “‘universal’ struggles between tradition and change, intergenerational tensions, the quest for ‘self’ through recognition by others, self-fulfillment and self-realization” (Prentice 2006, p. 258). The result is an unrooted cultural mirage, which probably looks beautiful from afar but feels untouchable to those who are close enough. While *Whale Rider* was still generally successful despite this problem, the remake of *Mulan* failed in this assimilation attempt because it encountered more complex cross-cultural difficulties.

Like *Whale Rider*, the remake of *Mulan* gives much care to setting, costume, and makeup when representing the cultural environment. It ensures that Mulan does not act like a surrogate for contemporary Western mainstream values, using instead four Chinese characters as her moral guidance. Three of them, *xiao* (孝; filial piety), *zhong* (忠; loyalty), and *yong* (勇; bravery), accurately embody the Confucian values commonly attached to Mulan in Chinese culture. The remake characterizes Mulan’s father much like Koro and Hank in that he also represents both what a woman can obtain from and what she must overcome in her native culture, non-Western or Western. It also makes a genuine effort to avoid cultural offense. The removal of Mushu, for example, was not only for the gender reason analyzed in Section 3, but also for a cultural reason: The remake’s creative team “took note of [the] adverse reactions from Chinese audiences to the use of an animated dragon,” a sign of respect, strength, and power in Chinese culture, “as a silly sidekick” (Krstic 2020).

Just as the remake’s changes for better gender representation were restricted, however, so too were its attempted changes for better cultural representation. In both cases, Caro had to avoid a fundamental breakaway from the original framework set by the animated film. Once again, the remake had to find a compromised middle ground, which results in internal contradictions that hurt the persuasiveness of its attempted adherence to Confucian values. For example, following the animated film and departing from the Chinese versions of the legend, Mulan in the remake secretly escapes to join the army against her parents’ will. But a Mulan who truly believes in the principle of *xiao* would never disobey her parents like that. The compromised middle ground also makes the remake’s removal of the fake “Chinese problem” incomplete. For example, although the remake gives a new reason for Mulan’s punishment that departs from the animated film’s Orientalist invention of “Chinese” misogyny, it stops short of returning to the Chinese tradition, which always praises rather than punishes Mulan for joining the army to save her father.¹⁰ As discussed in Section 3, the punishment poses a major question to the remake’s feminist message as to why Mulan still wants to fight for the patriarchal power that ostracizes her.

The remake’s persuasive cultural representation is further damaged by its attempt to squeeze convenient Chinese cultural touchstones into a “universal” feminist theme. As critics quickly pointed out after the film’s release in China, its use of Tai Chi, a Chinese martial art that was created in the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) or later, is anachronistic to the Mulan legend. Unfortunately, this is not a neglectable error because the film uses *qi*, a central concept of Tai Chi, as its thematic metaphor for feminine power and confidence. It is through Tai Chi, *qi*, and *zhen* (真; honesty, staying true), one of Mulan’s four moral guidance Chinese characters, that Caro attempts to assimilate the Chinese story into a “universal” theme of feminist struggles. Through a story of how Mulan learns to stay true to herself and stop hiding her *qi*, the remake attempts to send a cross-cultural message that women should trust themselves and fearlessly exercise their power despite the protests of

the male-dominated world. Unfortunately, the anachronistic cultural tools it uses to deliver this message come at cost to the film's cultural accurateness.

As the remake's poor reception in China shows, the assimilation failed. To be fair, however, the remake's cultural glitches should not be held solely responsible for this failure. The general Chinese audience may also misunderstand their own complex culture, criticizing the remake for those elements that actually make historical sense. Examples include two elements that have attracted the most cultural criticism in China. One is the makeup Mulan wears when taking an interview with a matchmaker, and the other is the architectural style of her home.

The scene of the matchmaker's interview actually shows a decent effort in following Chinese historical documents to design Mulan's makeup. Yet the makeup appears "strange," "ugly," "over-the-top," "bad", "awkward", and "unrealistic" to many Chinese viewers, who are far different from those living in Mulan's time in terms of their aesthetic tastes (Chen and Ding 2019; Yu 2020; Chen et al. 2021). The strange feeling of the makeup is then enhanced by the matchmaker's interview, which is indeed a fake "Chinese" custom inherited from the animated film. The result is a misfired charge of "Orientalist distortion" at the makeup.

In the remake, Mulan's home is a *tulou* (土楼; earthen buildings). Mostly built by the Hakka people in southeastern China between the 12th and the 20th centuries, the *tulou* appear very far from Mulan's legend in terms of both place and time. This "mistake" has been widely joked about and taken as another evidence of a typical "Orientalist" error (e.g., Song and Xie 2020). However, the Hakka people are known for waves of massive migrations in history but having well maintained their ancestral traditions. The first wave of their migrations originated precisely in northern China around Mulan's time. It may not be coincidental, therefore, that *tulou* and its closely connected architectural form *tubao* (土堡; earthen forts) built by the Hakka people in southeastern China bear similarities to *wubao* (坞堡; forts), a popular architectural style in northern China around Mulan's time, in terms of their enclosed and strong structure for defensive purposes. Since *wubao* no longer exist today except in images or as models, a *tulou* or a *tubao* is in fact the next best real location to shoot a Mulan film.

Even without these glitches and misunderstandings on both sides, it would still have been difficult for the attempted assimilation to be successful. As shown in the case of *Whale Rider*, it is challenging and risks cultural offense to try to connect a traditionally interpreted cultural concept or practice to a new interpretation from the perspective of a cross-cultural feminist intervention. In the Chinese tradition, *qi* is often understood as a gender-neutral life energy. Although diverse new interpretations of *qi* have long been introduced to modern Chinese-language martial arts literature and films, the remake's presentation of *qi* as a feminine superpower on the basis of staying "true" to oneself still feels too Hollywood, Disney, or *yang* to many Chinese viewers. It invited much conservative criticism of alleged "arrogance and biases" toward Chinese culture (e.g., CNA 2020).

Although *Mulan* is based on an ancient legend, the contemporary political context affected the effectiveness of its cross-cultural feminist message in a similar manner as that of *Whale Rider*, which is set in the present time. The co-existence of valid and unsubstantial cultural criticism of the remake of *Mulan* in mainland China was a combined result of the growing resistance to Western cultural hegemony and the augmenting Chinese nationalism with its own arrogance, biases, conservatism, and oversensitivity. Moreover, today's mainland China is a central area of complex political conflicts and controversies, which made the success of a Chinese story with a "universal" feminist appeal even less attainable. The remake encountered two major boycott calls for its supposedly pro-China political implications. The first boycott call began on 14 August, 2019, when the star actress Liu Yifei, who plays Mulan in the film, reposted a social media image to express her support of the Hong Kong police during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protests. Although this behavior was not related to her filming of *Mulan*, which at that point had been completed for almost 9 months, it nonetheless triggered an online campaign #BoycottMulan rallying

supporters of the protests across the world (Burt 2020). This was probably the key reason that the film encountered a lackluster reception in Hong Kong (Zaharia 2020). The second boycott call began on 7 September 2020, just several days after the film was premiered on Disney+, because social media users noted that the film's credits thanked eight government entities in Xinjiang, where China was accused of exercising expansive surveillance and repression over Uyghurs, an ethnic group whose ancestors were Inner Asian steppe nomads (Qin and Wong 2020). Related to the latter controversy, there is also criticism of the film's portrayal of villains with "standard racist tropes by which European sources have portrayed Inner Asian steppe nomads ('Tartars') since Roman times," which is yet another cultural problem that the remake inherits from the animated film (Millward 2020).

Among all the twists and turns in the reception of *Mulan* (2020), perhaps the most ironic one is that the disappointment with the remake even led the Chinese audience to join their US counterpart in a nostalgia for *Mulan* (1998). In addition to the alleged "orientalist view" of and "disrespectful attitude" toward China, many Chinese viewers also gave the remake negative reviews for its "radical" departure from the original animated film (Geng 2020). They seem to be not only unaware of the much worse cultural problems in the animated film, but also forgetful about the exact same cultural critiques that the animated film received when it was first released in China.

To use the above-quoted words of Metiria Turei, however, this forgetfulness only proves that the Chinese cultural process is also "ever evolving" and "meeting new ways of thinking," just like the Māori or any other cultural process. Despite the initial resistance it encountered, the animated film has long crossed the porous border between Disney and Chinese cultures. The changes it introduced even influenced later Chinese adaptations of *Mulan's* legend. In a large-budget Chinese film *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* (dir. Jingle Ma, 2009), for example, *Mulan* also becomes a not-so-filial daughter who steals away from her family against her father's will, and she also has to face a law that punishes woman's participation in the army by death.¹¹ This evolution of *Mulan* happens in a larger discursive context in which the Western-originated values that the Disney's *Mulan* stands for, such as individualism and self-realization, are reshaping Chinese mainstream culture today.

5. Conclusions

If box office revenue were the only concern, then the issue of cross-cultural filmmaking might not be so complex. With solid data and calculations, scholars have come to the conclusion that an effective way to attract audiences unfamiliar with the culture represented in a film is to "decrease the cultural specificity of the stories while increasing culturally specific aesthetic elements, such as costumes and music" (Wang et al. 2020). This is in fact also a tried and tested strategy that Disney has adopted for decades. *Mulan* (1998)'s "Chinese" audiovisual feast, for example, worked smoothly with its story detached from any accurate, let alone in-depth, representation of Chinese cultural specificity for the film's global market success. Such a cross-cultural appeal, however, was both a result of and a contribution to the perpetuation of Western-centered cultural and racial hierarchy as well as the Hollywood-dominated global film culture. As shown in the changing Chinese reception of *Mulan* (1998), the perpetuation has been so prevalent that even the misrepresented peoples may begin to accept and internalize the fabrications of their own cultures by and for the hierarchy, in which the Western cultures offer "universal" values and non-Western cultures provide exotic sensory pleasures.

Combined with gender, sexual, and political hierarchies, this cultural and racial hierarchy poses a complex intersectional challenge to those who are based in the West and want to engage in progressive cross-cultural filmmaking. Niki Caro is a case in point. Working in Hollywood, her progressive voice challenging the gender and sexual hierarchy needs to first find a way into the Western mainstream culture through compromises with market conventions. Such compromises, however, may not only weaken and dissolve her feminist positions on specific issues, but also sustain some Western cultural, racial, and political biases. Moreover, despite her respectful attitude toward other cultures and

the indisputable value of her political messages, she still often benefits from rather than challenges the power relationships in the Western-centered cultural and racial hierarchy when attempting to assimilate non-Western stories into a “universal” feminist theme beyond cultural specificities. This intersectional complexity is of course even more layered when we consider how China’s own political, ethnical, and cultural power relationships may come into play in such concrete and dramatic ways as those mentioned above.

This article has attempted to flesh out some of the real-world challenges that the remake of *Mulan* encountered and dealt with imperfectly amid this extreme intersectional complexity. At the same time, it also tries to make clear that the remake has nonetheless made important progress to address some serious gender and cultural problems in *Mulan*’s contemporary intertextual metamorphosis, especially those introduced by the Disney animation. This progress, though flawed, indicates that even the persistent “Disney problem” may be resolved in the future. But this is not up to filmmakers alone. Critics and scholars also need to do their parts. Joining existing efforts in studying Disney’s attempts to turn problematic animated classics into more socially conscious remakes (e.g., Kunze 2021), this article hopefully makes a small contribution to a larger understanding of how Disney and Hollywood’s approach to film can and should be changed. After all, the Disney culture is also “ever evolving” and constantly “meeting new ways of thinking.” Its future direction may well continue to have significant impacts on the health of our global, cultural, and discursive environment, and hence deserves increased and continuous critical attention and intervention.

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Notes

- ¹ The film was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was another important factor affecting its revenue. Its limited theatrical release grossed \$66.8 million worldwide (data source: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt4566758/> (accessed on 15 October 2021), and its online video-on-demand release generated an estimated revenue of \$60–90 million (Sims 2020).
- ² For a full list of official Disney princes, see https://dis.fandom.com/wiki/Disney_Princes (accessed on 15 October 2021).
- ³ A small number of women mined coal in the first half of the 20th century in the US, but their labor was invisible and secretive, and women were not recognized as full participants in the coal industry until the consent decree (Moore 1990).
- ⁴ For more details of the legal case, see (Bingham and Gansler 2002) and (Korzec 2007).
- ⁵ While I focus on Caro and the gender reason here, the removal of Mushu was likely a collective decision and for multiple reasons. Section 4 discusses the cultural reason behind it.
- ⁶ The #MeToo movement was the official reason that the producer of *Mulan* (2020) gave to the erasure of Li Shang. As analysed in this article, however, it was just one reason among a set of related others. In fact, as reflected in the news report, without a proper understanding of the other reasons in the same section, one can have a hard time understanding the relationship of the #MeToo movement and the animated character (Wallis 2020).
- ⁷ Because Qiang represents a negative and less noticeable part of the popular character Li Shang, many tend to overlook the connection between the two. This includes even Jason Reed, producer of the film, who claimed that Li Shang was just split into two characters, Commander Tung and Honghui (Wallis 2020).
- ⁸ The translation of *Ballad of Mulan* is quoted from (Kwa and Idema 2010).
- ⁹ The animated *Mulan* was released in multiple languages. The “Xiongnu” and the “Hun” armies are the said enemies of “China” in its Chinese and English versions, respectively. They are either anachronistic or anachronistic for the story. The remake’s choice to characterize the Rouran army as *Mulan*’s enemy is much more reasonable and in accordance with a common scholarly speculation, although the ballad does not specify exactly whom *Mulan* fights.

- ¹⁰ This is not to argue that the Chinese traditional stories necessarily treat Mulan “better,” just that the traditional Chinese gender issues are utterly different from the Orientalist stereotypes and cannot be used to support a hierarchy under Western supremacy. In the Confucian versions of Mulan’s legend, she is always recognized as an extraordinary woman for her military achievements but may encounter serious problems *after* that. For example, she may have to commit suicide to refuse the emperor’s “favor” of taking her as a concubine. Ironically, the emperor in that case will give Mulan more honor posthumously for her “chastity,” another central Confucian value that is traditionally attached to Mulan but not adopted by the remake for obvious reasons (Wang 2020b).
- ¹¹ *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* is a Mulan film that deserves separate research. According to Guo Shu, executive president of Starlight International Media Group, the film’s primary Chinese production company, *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* was made “with a sense of national responsibility.” “Now that foreigners can produce a popular movie out of the story Hua Mulan, why can’t we Chinese present its own to the world?” (Liu 2009). In both popular and scholarly discourses, the film has often been praised for presenting a “realistic” (Mansuri 2017) and “authentic” (Maknae 2021) Mulan, who “possesses all the images of women in traditional Chinese culture” (Wang 2020a, p. 78). The film, however, is far more complex than a mere nationalist reclamation of Mulan. Rather, it is a tension-ridden mixture of the different yet equally melodramatic and flattening imaginations of Chinese history and culture routinely produced in the present-day film industries of mainland China, Hong Kong (where the director Jingle Ma is based), and Hollywood (especially Disney).

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