



## **“HUA MULAN” IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY: A STUDY OF THE DISNEY FILM MULAN (2020)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the popular heroines from a Chinese legend in a movie produced by Disney Film is Hua Mulan which also plays a significant role in inspiring audiences around the world. This qualitative research aims at identifying the images displayed by the main character Hua Mulan in the action movie *Mulan* (2020) from the Chinese philosophical perspective and explaining the attractiveness of the film from a popular culture perspective. The primary data were gathered through careful observation of the main Chinese heroine character Hua Mulan from film scenes. They were then analyzed by using Barthes’ semiotic theory to conceptualize the depiction of the character from the Chinese philosophical perspective and to relate it to the elements of popular culture. The study revealed that Hua Mulan could signify the value of filial piety and courage, particularly in the perspective of Chinese philosophy. From a popular culture view, the legendary characterization of Hua Mulan was the main attraction to draw audience’s attention, especially those who expected to see the Chinese heroine in a colossal action movie played by popular actors.

**Keywords:** Chinese heroine character, Disney films, *Mulan*, popular culture

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Film as a means of entertainment has experienced significant development. This has made many film industries continue to be creative and active in fulfilling people’s desire. Walt Disney Studio film production, for example, is one of the well-known film industries which always produces various kinds of popular animated movies. The films produced by the Walt Disney company have often been favorites for many people (Rudy et al., 2022). Known for their popular animated films, Disney’s

creativity in making films is worthy of praise. Disney Studio has always shown great efforts when it comes to its collection of film characters, both the historical and current ones with the aim of touching the public (Xiao et al., 2021). Market is certainly a serious concern for the Disney Company (Lin, 2023).

The era of globalization filled with digitalization has encouraged everyone, especially women to develop strong attitudes or behavior. One of the media

considered effective to use to learn to develop positive traits is through movies which emphasize female characters as heroines. There are many legends which often tell about the lives of women and the philosophical values. One of them is from China. As one of the largest countries and one of the oldest cultural civilizations in the world, Chinese philosophy has influenced the lives of a lot of people. Chinese philosophy emphasizes that humans, society, and nature are significantly related and therefore, all forms of development must consider the aspects of humanity, society, and nature (Wang, 2023). Chinese culture has been deeply influenced by three Chinese philosophical teachings-Confucianism, Taoism (Daoism), and Buddhism (Ye, 2014; Dekabrskiy, 2019).

These three philosophical concepts are considered a significant basis for the formation of Chinese character. Confucian teaching is essential because it has influenced the development of human life principles, knowledge and social harmony, especially in Asian countries (Tu, 2009). Besides Confucianism, Chinese philosophy has also been influenced by Taoism which according to Dekabrskiy (2019) has played an essential role, especially in knowledge and Chinese arts such as fēngshuǐ harmonization, astrology, qìgōng practice, traditional Chinese martial arts techniques, wushu, etc. Later, when Buddhism entered China, it was also considered significant in the life of Chinese people. It has played an important role in both Chinese culture and philosophy because Buddhist teachings are universal and able to attract people from all social classes without discrimination (Ou, 2012).

This is an interesting discussion, especial if it is related to Chinese legends. One of the Chinese legends which is rich in

life values and can be studied from a philosophical perspective is the life of Hua Mulan. The story of the Chinese heroine Hua Mulan was originally adapted into an animated film by Walt Disney Pictures in 1998 with the title Mulan. It achieved great popularity at that time. People from various countries were starting to get to know the story of Mulan. The animated character of Hua Mulan has become popular and admired by its fans.

After the animated character Hua Mulan (also known as Fa Mulan) produced by Disney succeeded in impressing animated film fans, in 2020 the Walt Disney film company presented the character Hua Mulan played by the Chinese actress Liu Yifei in the live-action movie with the same title. As a famous world-class film production company, the Walt Disney company believes that the live version of Mulan can also captivate the audience, so they carried out a well-established plan for it. It is obvious that this product provided huge profits for Disney. Apart from its popularity, there are also several studies which discuss Mulan released by Disney in 2020. Most of them, according to Lu & Liu (2021) talked about Mulan from the cultural perspectives.

Therefore, this study aims to identify how the character Hua Mulan was portrayed in Disney films according to Chinese philosophy and it is also necessary to analyze what the attractive points can be found in the film from the perspective of popular culture. In this way, the study can be used to expand knowledge about the depiction of strong women as characters in Walt Disney films; to provide readers with an understanding of the role of films as popular culture products; as well as being an additional reference for those who

intend to discuss about female hero movies and popular culture.

There have been several studies on Mulan movie published in journals. Sulistia, for example, in 2016 discussed the main character of the animated movie Mulan in her study and found that the character Hua Mulan was dominated by masculine characteristics. Besides, there were also a few article journals discussed about Mulan from a gender equality perspective as well as a feminist view. For instance, research conducted by Lu and Liu (2021) focused on feminism in the movie and the way trans-cultural effort is needed to understand it. Next, Usman et al. (2021) who observed Mulan film revealed that the idea of women not being able to do things that men do is a stereotype towards women. Still on feminism, another study from Chen et al. (2023) also pointed out that Mulan portrays issues of inequality, the fact that women are still ignored and the need to emphasize gender equality.

Another kind of study about Mulan was the study by Chen et al. (2022) which focused on the response of chinese audiences towards the live-action version of Mulan produced by Disney. There is also research on Mulan in terms of the language style, for example, a study conducted by Efendi and Sugiharti (2023) which revealed that the use of formal language is the most dominant because it is influenced by the film setting that frequently depict a formal atmosphere.

After reviewing a number of studies that discuss about Mulan, this study is different from others in terms of research focus, approach and the study framework. The focus of this study is the main character which is the core point to identify the images attached to the it from the perspective of the three teachings of

Chinese philosophy-confucianis, Taoism and Buddhism. The approach applied in this study is Barthes' semiotic theory which is useful to conceptualize the main characters. Apart from that, this study is also directed at discussing the elements of popular culture found in the movie. So, even though the study of Mulan has been done before, this study can still provide some new ideas as well as findings.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Barthes' semiotic theory was applied to interpret the signs that show the images displayed by the main character Hua Mulan in the film. Scenes in the film which portrayed the main character in actions or with dialogues in the semiotic system can signify something or meaning which can construct a concept.

This method is mentioned by Barthes (1991) who explained that there are various objects which can be used to show a concept. Barthes sees everything around human would be able helpful to explain phenomena people experience. The things or ideas people use to signify something are involved in the semiological system. Barthes explains that what is seen or observed through eyes or experienced by people would be signifier. That would be explained by any other relevant contexts or texts to produce connotative meanings which would generate a sign to show the meaning of what is observed by human senses.

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

The main data in this study is a colossal action film set in Chinese culture produced by the Walt Disney company in 2020 with the title Mulan. In addition, Rudy (2023) every element in a film such as characters, actions, conversations, etc. are signs. Since this is qualitative research, the

appearance, dialogs or actions shown by the main character Hua Mulan in the movie were important elements to be analyzed in this study. Besides, there are number of relevant references used to support the arguments in the study.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result

The results of data analysis revealed two ideas: the basic characteristics which can be perceived as portraits of Hua Mulan's characterization and the appeal of Hua Mulan from the popular culture perspective.

### 4.2 Discussion

#### 4.2.1 The Portraits of Hua Mulan in Chinese Philosophy

In Chinese cultural civilization, traditions such as Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism also known as three teachings have had a major influence on Chinese philosophy (Chen, 1971; Zhang & Veenhoven, 2008; Ye, 2014; Wang, 2021). By using Barthes' semiotic approach, the essential character in the film Mulan can be interpreted as followings:

##### (a) The Value of Filial Piety to Parents

Careful observation and interpretation by applying Barthes' semiotic theory showed that the image portrayed by Hua Mulan were classified into three parts: signifier, signified and sign.



**Figure 1** A film scene from Mulan showing Hua Mulan practicing using a spear to fight

**Signifier:** Hua Mulan as the main character could be clearly seen and observed on the cinema screen

**Signified:** a young girl, spear, traditional male combat training uniform

**Sign:** Hua Mulan, a young girl in a traditional Chinese male combat training uniform is using a spear to practice fighting.

This sign could be interpreted as a girl who is willing to go to war to replace her elderly father. This signifies the value of being filial to parents.

One of the most important life values that a person must have is filial piety towards parents. Filial piety in Chinese language is 孝 (xiào). Being filial to parents is a value that must not be ignored at any time. Even though each person has a different level of filial piety towards parents, the concept of filial piety still needs to be defined. This is because in everyday life, many people do not seem to understand the meaning of filial piety to their parents. Studies on filial piety have also been carried out for a long time. In general, such studies are often related to religious, sociological and psychological views. However, they all contribute to understanding the concept of filial piety. The culture of filial piety in China has been a characteristic of the nation since Chinese civilization which has been passed down from one generation to the next (Miao, 2015). It means that in the history of Chinese civilization, every ruling dynasty in China continued to emphasize the importance of the value of filial piety as a life principle which occupied an essential position in the life of every individual.

One of the most influential traditions, Confucianism has placed filial piety as the core of the teaching. The importance of Confucianism in the context of Chinese culture can be seen from the history of Chinese philosophy which proves the Confucian teachings about ethics have become the basic pattern of culture and identity for the Chinese people (Kang et al.,

2015). Additionally, according to Poškaitė (2014) in her study on filial piety in Chinese culture, the ethics and morality in Chinese tradition, particularly Confucianism, have taught that being filial to parents both during life and after death, must be sincerity, obedience, respect, and willingness to sacrifice.



**Figure 2** The character Hua Mulan replaces her father to take part in the war

In Confucian philosophy, Hwang (1999) explained that filial piety could be simply understood as a person exists physically because of his or her parents and followers of Confucianism see that family is one inseparable body. Being filial to parents by listening and obeying to their advice is part of valuable life goal according to Confucian teaching (Yang, 2019).

In Chinese culture, it is not only Confucianism which discusses about filial piety towards parents, Taoism (Daoism) and Buddhism also emphasize the importance of developing a filial attitude. Taoism explains that the basic purpose of humans is to serve and help other people without expecting personal gains (Lee et al., 2009). This has taught the Chinese people to respect and help everyone, particularly their own family members. So, this basic idea is clearly reflected in the personality of the character Hua Mulan who helps her family and country selflessly. In the perspective of Taoism, Wang (2021) pointed out that Taoist teachings emphasize that filial piety to parents is a priority.

This is also mentioned in Buddhism. Filial piety is taught and written in Buddhist scriptures such as in The Sigālovāda Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya, Dhammapada, The Ullambana Sūtra, and The Sūtra of Filial Piety to Parents. The essence of filial piety to parents in Buddhism, according to Guang (2016) is that it teaches people (especially Buddhists) to repay their parents' kindness by caring for and respecting them because it is one of the main good deeds. Filial piety to parents is perceived as a high value in almost all cultures in the world. Thus, based on Hao's thought (2023), it is a universal fundamental value which will last longer. The character Hua Mulan showed an attitude of sacrificing for the family by disguising herself as a son in place of her father who was old enough to go to war.



**Figure 3** A scene in Mulan showing Hua Mulan fighting with a sword

This is, based on semiotic analysis, a sign that can be defined as a feeling of great filial piety towards parents. The relationship between the character Hua Mulan and her filial attitude towards her parents was also revealed by Chen et al. (2022) who argues that the character Hua Mulan in the Chinese folklore plays a significant role in terms of presenting a role model as a figure who prioritizes a sense of filial piety, justice as well as courage. This is especially essential to inspire younger generations.

## **(b) The Value of Woman's Courage**

Furthermore, the result of interpretation using Barthes' semiotic system showed that there was a portrait from a movie scene that indicated courage.

**Signifier:** the character Hua mulan shown on the movie screen

**Signified:** a young girl wielding a sword, fighting against enemies, battlefield

**Sign:** Hua Mulan, a young girl wielding a sword to fight against enemies on the battlefield.

The sign can be conceptualized as a picture of a woman's bravery which appears as a significant image in the movie. What makes the character of Mulan different from other princess characters in Disney films, according to Sulistia (2016) is that she has great courage even though she is still very young. Although there is research revealing a slight difference between the term "bravery" which tends to refer to physical strength to fight anything that is dangerous and the term "courage" which refers to mental resilience or having the spirit of a social hero, in this study, both terms can be used to represent Hua Mulan. According to Kinsella et al. (2017) both "bravery" and "courage" are the characteristics that a hero or heroine must have.

However, Chinese philosophy tends to discuss about courage because its meaning is broader. Courage is a fundamentally precious virtue in ancient Chinese philosophy. Courage in Chinese language is 勇氣 (Yǒngqì). So, courage in the context of Chinese philosophy is a value that an individual must have for good and moral purposes. As one of the famous heroines in Chinese legend, Hua Mulan's courage is an essential value to Chinese tradition. Courage as the foundation of the Chinese nation has been taught for generations since Chinese civilization. Human life is

always full of obstacles and challenges. However, in reality, not many people have courage to face problems or difficulties. Courage has been mentioned in Chinese philosophy since ancient times.

It was taught in ancient Chinese traditions such as Taoism and Confucianism and is also explained in Buddhism. Chen (2010) stated that courage in Confucian teachings is categorized as a noble characteristic. Whereas in Taoism, Yuan (2019) explained that the concept of courage refers to living life without avoiding all challenges and knowing the ability to do so. So the courage portrayed in the character Hua Mulan can reflect a good and commendable attitude that Chinese people must have. It is not a characteristic that only a man should have. A woman in Chinese culture also needs to have the courage to face difficulties. In addition, courage in the Buddhist view is often associated with a person's morals that can help eliminate fear of failure, exclusion, bad intentions and it can also function as the power of compassion to face challenges based on ethics (Sutthirat et al., 2023). Courage is a noble value needed to become a strong nation. The depiction of Hua Mulan as a woman who fought to defend her country shows that Chinese philosophy mentions that courage is in everyone. Thus, by presenting a heroine in the story of Mulan, people can see that women who have courage can also work together with men to face and solve problems.

So, the value of filial piety to parents and the value of courage portrayed by the main character Hua Mulan in the film Mulan are perceived as an essential part of Chinese culture. The three teachings – Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism which have influenced Chinese philosophy, emphasize that these two values are indeed significant

to create a better individual, society, and nation.

#### **4.2.2 The appeal of Hua Mulan from the Popular Culture Perspective**

A few legends from various countries have their own charm because their stories can inspire, educate or enrich someone's cultural insight. However, if a legend or a story is made into a movie, it must make a profit for the filmmaker. Mulan which reflects an interesting concept of Chinese philosophy through its main character Hua Mulan does not only prioritize Chinese traditions to gain popularity. In other words, it was not made to impress audiences by presenting the richness of Chinese culture. Further, it must have something to sell, so that it can attract audiences from all around the world.

It is true to say that all films produced by Walt Disney contain elements of popular culture. The basic understanding of popular culture is public consumption. A culture is called popular, if it is interesting and enjoyed by a lot of people (Shamad, 2023). In other words, products from popular culture must be those that can attract people to consume. Additionally, popular culture, according to Adi (2011) is unique and can also please people. The reason popular culture products are mass produced is that they are oriented towards the tastes and expectations of consumers. As a popular culture product, a film must have selling value. This is similar to the idea mentioned by Storey (2006) that popular culture products are usually mass produced for commercial purposes. Thus, popular films must be able to become products that sell well in the market.

It is not surprising that Hollywood film producers always compete to fulfill the tastes of film lovers so that they can make large profits. From a popular culture

perspective, a film must have selling values in the market. It means the film producers must be able to get profits from the products they sell. To be able to reach a larger audience, every film company must take the right steps so that they can sell their films well. This live-action version of Mulan has its own plus point in terms of the story because it inherits the success of the animated film in 1998 which was already popular. It is inevitable that the animated version of Mulan is a great start to introduce the Chinese heroine Hua Mulan to the world.

However, Disney's strategy to attract public attention for Mulan 2020 is to present famous, well-experienced and reputable Chinese actors. A study by Elberse (2007) proves that film stars or actors have an impact on the success of a movie and their achievements, performance, award-winning experience can also play a vital role in making a film popular. Additionally, from a marketing point of view, the figure, characteristics and image of an actor are his professional attributes which can be a selling point in the entertainment industry (King, 2010). In addition, according to Hofmann (2019), this has a huge influence on the success of a film because choosing the right actors can artistically attract the audience, show the film quality, promote and increase the popularity of the film. So, in other words, one of the most significant assets for entertainment companies is their celebrities such as musicians, actors, advertising models, etc. (Mathys et al., 2017).

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the live-action film Mulan (2020) revealed two significant points as the conclusion:

(a) the analysis by applying Barthes' semiotic theory to interpret the image portrayed by the main character Hua Mulan suggested that the description of the main characters attitudes and dialogs in the movie is a sign which can be defined as the value of filial piety to parents and the value of women's courage. These two life values are the philosophy closely related to the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism which are part of Chinese culture.

(b) The result of study also showed that the live-action film of Mulan with the Chinese colossal action genre is a popular culture product created to meet the tastes of film lovers so that the movie can sell well in the market.

It also pointed out that there were two elements found in Mulan which are considered the selling points of the movie, first, the presence of famous, well-performing and experienced actors (film stars) used by Disney film production and second, the story of Hua Mulan is a legendary folktale from China which has been popularly produced in the form of animated films by Disney in 1998. Thus, the live-action version became a product that many people had been waiting for.

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