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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Chinese Elements in Film *Mulan* (2020) and Its Intercultural Transmission

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to analyze Chinese elements and their intercultural transmission in the film *Mulan*. Disney's live-action film *Mulan* set off a global craze after its release in 2020. A large quantity of Chinese elements appeared in the film have aroused foreign audiences' interest, attention and heated discussion, thus spreading Chinese culture worldwide. Based on Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding theory, this paper finds that the film reflects both material and spiritual cultural elements of China, such as *tulou* architecture (the earthen buildings constructed in Fujian province in southern China), traditional clothing, kung fu. However, the results of the study reveal that the film encodes and decodes these elements at various levels so that it produces different cultural psychology for the target language audience. Therefore, in the process of intercultural transmission, appropriate methods, including in-depth exploration of Chinese elements and correct encoding and decoding, must be adopted.

**KEYWORDS**

Disney film *Mulan* (2020); Encoding and Decoding Theory; Chinese elements; intercultural transmission

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### 1. Introduction

For much of the past decades, China has made a range of achievements in cultural innovation and cultural communication, including the cultural creation of The Forbidden City in Beijing and the popularity of short video producer Li Ziqi. For example, Li Ziqi, a girl from a rural area in southwest China, has taken truly confident steps to spread Chinese culture overseas (Lu, 2019: 94). The cultural creation of the Palace Museum, a pioneering experiment, stands out as a prominent contemporary model of the inheritance and development of traditional culture (Xiang, 2019: 124). However, most of the impacts are just exerted in domestic areas rather than in other regions of the world. Compared with the large movie companies such as Hollywood Pictures and the Walt Disney Company, which have won a great reputation and have made tremendous achievements in disseminating culture, China still lags behind in its intercultural transmission. Looking at the movies produced by the Walt Disney Company, especially the film *Mulan*, it is found that it captivated more people and won a more profound influence. In the film *Mulan*, plenty of intoxicating landscapes and attractive Chinese elements were manifested through more ingenious tactics and advanced technologies. The film *Mulan* is a deep exploration of Chinese culture. However, there was also cultural misuse in the film; thereby, it is essential to explore how to correctly use Chinese elements and learn more about cultural transmission. According to Dou Weilin (2011: 24), intercultural communication is becoming more important nowadays. Learning about intercultural transmission is beneficial to disseminate Chinese culture and setting a good image for China. There have been many scholars analyzing the borrowing of Chinese elements in different foreign films and the differences between Chinese and Western cultural values, but most of them only focus on helping Chinese films go out of the national market. This thesis focuses on analyzing the Chinese elements in *Mulan*---the Disney live-action film released in 2020. It aims to discuss how to spread Chinese culture by means of

intercultural communication theory. Alongside that, this thesis also consists of the following aspects: the first part presents the Chinese elements in *Mulan*; the second part analyzes the illumination of cultural transmission from the success of *Mulan*.

## 2. The Theory of "Encoding and Decoding"

The theory of "Encoding and Decoding" was put forward by Stuart Hall, a British cultural researcher, in his book *Encoding and Decoding of Television Discourse* in 1973. In his opinion, "encoding" refers to the process by which the sender converts the message to codes with specific meanings, while "decoding" means the receiver interprets the above codes according to specific rules (Chen, 2022: 83). In the process of communication, encoding and decoding act as significant ways. Scholars identify eight key components of communication within the framework of communication: message, sender, receiver, channel, noise, feedback, encoding and decoding (Dou, 2011: 6).

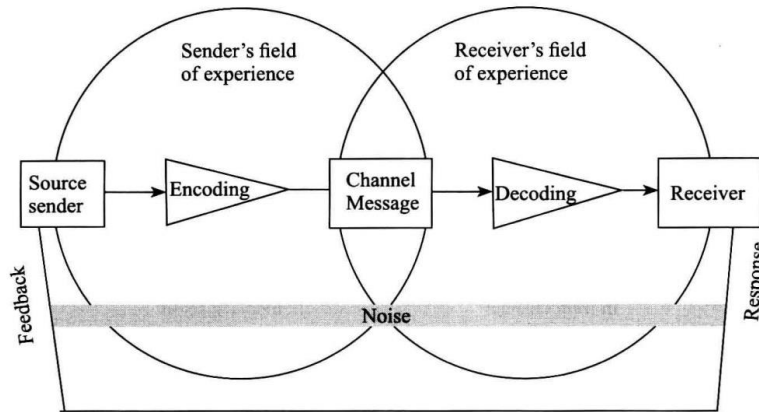


Fig. 1 Components of Communication (Dou, 2011: 6)

According to Hall (1980: 118), "the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange, and that the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding', though only 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments." The encoding/decoding model is the conceptual basis of Hall's media discourse in mass-communication research (Davis, 2004: 33). The process of encoding and decoding reflects the transmission course of "message-code-message". In the process, the receivers' social background, cultural identity, and education level cause their different interpretations when receiving messages.

However, the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is the degrees of "understanding" and "misunderstanding" in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. But this, in turn, depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes (Hall, 1980: 119).

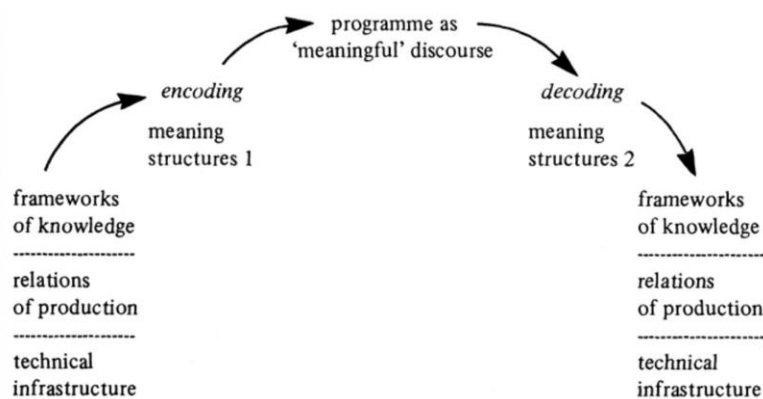


Fig. 2 Codes of Encoding and Decoding (Hall, 1980: 119)

## 3. Chinese elements in the film *Mulan*

### 3.1 An Introduction to the Film *Mulan*

In 2020, Walt Disney Pictures released a live-action drama version of *Mulan*, which tells an ancient Chinese story: a girl named Mulan disguises herself as a male soldier to substitute for her father in the conscription army. In northern garrisons along the silk

road, the trade was disrupted, and many Chinese citizens were slaughtered by Rourans. Faced with a shortage of troops, the Chinese emperor decreed that every family must contribute one man to fight against the northern invaders. As a female in Hua's family, Mulan decided to replace the old and ailing father. Dressed up as a man under the alias Huajun, she went through various tests and martial arts training. In the end, with her tremendous tenacity, iron will and extraordinary wisdom, Mulan fought bravely to save the country and bring glory to her family, making herself one of the greatest heroines in history. This high-budget film contains enormous Chinese elements, having been shown in many countries around the world. It has won a great success. As China is playing a dispensable role in the world, Chinese elements are going out to the global.

### **3.2 Definition of Chinese Elements**

Chinese elements refer to the sum of all kinds of things born in China from time immemorial. Excellent Chinese elements refer to the symbols, images or customs that are recognized by most Chinese people (including overseas Chinese), reflecting the national dignity and national spirit. It includes material cultural elements and spiritual cultural elements (Deng et al., 2004: 118). The Chinese Ministry of Culture has classified Chinese elements into ten categories, including modern famous architecture and great achievements; famous historical and cultural landscapes; major inventions and innovations; festivals, handicrafts, costumes and food; traditional opera, musical instruments and sports; influential academic works; eminent historical figures; natural landscape; animals and plants (including totem, mascot, etc.); famous cities, enterprises and schools.

### **3.3 Chinese traditional architecture—*tulou* building**

In the film *Mulan*, a great quantity of scenery scenes was shot in China, exceedingly magnificent and breathtaking, including the *tulou* building, which was set in Mulan's hometown. As an architectural heritage located in Fujian province, it was officially added to the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 2008. Circular earthen residential compounds built by the Hakka people originally was constructed to defend against bandits and foreign invaders. It reflects the characteristics of the people of the southeast coast of China, who attach great importance to family relations and live in groups. In the eyes of foreigners, Chinese people have strong family-centered values and collectivism, which is greatly reflected in the *tulou* architectural complex. The family is the cornerstone that constitutes Chinese civilization and colorful culture. The so-called family-centered standard is defined as a pivot for social members to communicate and carry out activities, fully demonstrated in an old Chinese saying, "East or west, home is the best." With patriarchal principle as the dominant role, it is formed in China's thousand-year-long history under the strong driving force of Confucianism. The decoding and encoding of the building in the film are correct and relatively shallow. It correctly realized that the *tulou* building is the symbol of Chinese collectivism, so it chose *tulou* as the shooting location and achieved the success of coding.

### **3.4 Chinese Clothing and Chinese Cuisine**

When it comes to Chinese culture, people will associate with the colorful and diverse clothing and the different styles of Chinese cuisine, which are vividly displayed in the movies. In this film, what leaves a striking impression on the audience is the "yellow makeup" (额黄妆) in people's faces. This makeup comes back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties when Buddhism flourished. Inspired by the image of Buddha, women painted their foreheads with a faint yellow color. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the "yellow makeup" was mostly directly dyed, and the effect of shading was from the hairline to the eyebrows. Later in the Tang Dynasty, it was directly covered with large colors without the effect of shading. From the leading role of Mulan to the other characters, they all wear "yellow makeup". The costume of the characters also basically retains the style characteristics of that time. When Mulan has a meal with her family, tea, dishes, chopsticks, rice, and utensils are used to serve the meal---all represent Chinese food culture. In order to seek out the folk characteristics of China during Mulan's life, the film specially contacted and consulted many famous Chinese historians and read historical records to find out the characteristics of cuisine and women's makeup during this period. So the movie decodes and encodes correctly about the two aspects and is not biased.

### **3.5 Chinese kung fu**

At the beginning of the film, Mulan shows off her kung fu skills by running to the roof of a house to catch a chicken that has escaped. After Mulan enters the army, she has to undergo military training and testing, jousting with her peers and fighting against the enemy. Therefore, there are wonderful and unique Chinese kung fu in plenty of action scenes in the film. As a Chinese martial art, kung fu is time-honored, with a history of over 4,200 years. Over 200 years ago, the word "kung fu" was introduced to Europe by French missionaries who called Qi (气) in Chinese Taoism as kung fu, but it was not popularized. Until the 1960s, Bruce Lee's kung fu films shot to fame, and the film *Leung Ting's wing Chun* spread to over 60 regions around the world. kung fu and Wing Chun greatly attracted people's attention and won their affection worldwide. Later in the 1960s, the prosperous film market in Hong Kong became a strong force in the increasing global influence of kung fu. The film boom has spawned movie stars who have

brought Chinese kung fu to the world, such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Donnie Yen and so on. Then, as Hollywood found a business opportunity in Chinese kung fu, this film production corporation employed Chinese actors and actresses and released numerous action movies, thus further promoting the impact of kung fu. As for Chinese kung fu, in fact, the film did not succeed in decoding because of the cultural differences between China and the West. As for Qi, Westerners do not know what it is. Actually, "Qi" is mainly the concept of Taoism and Confucianism, which stresses a kind of harmony and self-cultivation.

### **3.6 Spiritual, Cultural Elements**

#### **3.6.1 Filial piety**

Mulan is an obedient heroine with filial piety. In the film, running the risk of being beheaded by the emperor, she chooses to join the army with her aged and crippled father. In her mind, nothing would upset her more than to send her old father to war. Facing the harsh natural environment and cruel warfare, she fought bravely without flinch. Mulan shows the most significant Chinese spirits that Chinese values---patriotism and filial piety, the overriding factors that are used to measure whether a person is respectable or not. In Confucian philosophy, filial piety is regarded as a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors. The Confucian representative work *Xiao Jing*, which was written around the Qin-Han period, has historically become the authoritative source on the Confucian morality of "filial piety". Confucian culture emphasizes filial piety as the foundation of all virtues, which is also one of the cores of Confucianism. In Confucius doctrine, Ren and Li are two core concepts, which include filial piety. Confucius believed that filial piety and fraternal duty are the essence of Ren. *The Doctrine of the Mean* cites Confucius' saying, "The greatest love for people is the love for one's parents." (Ye & Zhu, 2010: 5)

#### **3.6.2 Patriotism**

The spirit of patriotism is the core of the Chinese nation in the long course of civilization development, including the spirit of creativity, struggle, solidarity and so on. Patriotism is the love and loyalty for one's country. It plays an exceedingly important role in Chinese long-lasting history, standing as a spiritual pillar. It is citizens' profound feelings and deep attachment to the country and nation where they grow up. In this film, Mulan's action greatly shows her patriotism, the core spirit of Chinese spirits. Besides, there are many patriotic heroes similar to Mulan in China, from Yue Fei and Huo Qubing in ancient times to Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, who rose up against the imperialist aggression in modern China. The two virtues were greatly influenced by China's ancient feudal rule and Confucianism. Mulan's filial piety to her parents and loyalty, as well as patriotism to her country, show the preeminent Chinese spirit and the charm of Chinese culture to the world.

In the original *Mulan* story, the Chinese wanted to emphasize more on her spirit of loyalty and filial piety. However, Westerners are less able to understand this spirit mainly because they emphasize individualism; they put the realization of personal value first. So in the film, Mulan is more like an American hero with a Chinese appearance. The film is not properly encoded and decoded.

## **4. Illumination of cultural transmission from success of *Mulan***

### **4.1 Using Chinese Elements to transmit culture**

With the great prosperity of the economy and culture, culture is playing an increasingly vital role in foreign cultural exchanges. Chinese elements can go beyond geographical and political boundaries and promote Chinese culture in a humanistic way, which is a typical representative of cultural exchanges with foreign countries. Appreciating and spreading Chinese elements with a positive attitude not only spreads China's friendship to the world but also wins back favourable international public opinion, which is universal and of practical significance.

At this moment, the use of the Internet has narrowed the space distance of the world. With the burgeoning development of economic globalization and integration, the globalization of world culture will emerge. Culture with a substantial mass foundation has increasingly become a widely used means for countries to publicize their values and influence. China should strive to show its comprehensive strength through its own cultural elements and infect the world with its unique charm through a cultural revival. This is the mission of a grand cultural nation. Chinese traditional culture has been deeply excavated and positively propagated, making the past serve the present, bringing forth the new through the old, which returns Chinese culture and inherits Chinese elements to find the root of culture. China moves to the center of the world, walks on the stage of economy and politics. In the cultural field, China faces up to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and seeks common ground while respecting differences and dares to open up, innovate and integrate. Through the display of Chinese elements, the essence of Chinese culture will be displayed to people around the world. Moreover, the cultural value of China will be displayed overseas, which is a bridge of friendly understanding and communication.

#### **4.2 Exploring and imitating cultural elements in depth**

Only by exploring Chinese elements in a sincere way can we spread our culture better. The in-depth exploration and imitation of cultural elements are vividly manifested in the film *Mulan*. In order to express the effect of the foreign cultural environment conveyed by the film, the most direct expression is the architecture, clothing and environment with regional characteristics. In the film *Mulan*, the production team made several field trips to China to explore Chinese cultural elements, visiting Fujian, Hubei and Gansu provinces. All the actors in the film are also Chinese actors or Asian faces. In order to give the audience more surprise of kung fu with Chinese characteristics, the film's leading actress Liu Yifei trained in martial arts for several months before filming began, and the team also studied Chinese kung fu movies and read a lot of materials. Therefore, in this film, we are enchanted by the magnificent imperial palace, the wide and narrow lanes bustling with people, the Chinese courtyard with red brick and green tile, and the beautiful landscape.

In terms of clothing, there are the costume styles of the Southern and Northern Dynasties in *Mulan*, as well as the female makeup, such as “额黄妆”. Alongside that, we also see bowls and chopsticks, lanterns, couplets, tea sets and other daily Chinese articles in the film. However, it is relatively tough to grasp the inner elements of Chinese culture. As China's traditional system is extensive and profound, the lack of profound exploration of Chinese culture will lead to some common sense mistakes in the film. For example, Hua Mulan originally lived in northern China, but the movie set her hometown in the southern folk residence *tulou* building, which was neglected by the creative team. Therefore, the correct in-depth excavation of Chinese elements is an essential prerequisite for the dissemination of Chinese culture. The movie *Mulan* can be an outstanding example for us.

#### **4.3 Looking for the Convergence of Chinese and Western Culture**

As one of the salient characteristics of culture, cultural diversity contributes to the vague boundary of culture. Since time immemorial, the frequent communication and integrity of different cultures have caused new cultures to form. Before we carry out intercultural communication, we should first recognize the huge differences between cultures as well as be more inclusive of cultural diversities. In a big world with many nationalities, cultures, and civilizations, it is inescapable for people to have various thinking codes and characteristics. Compared with differences, egotism, arrogance, and prejudice towards difference are more horrible. Chinese and Western cultures are different, so it is unavoidable that there are differences between them. Cai Qing (2018: 245) believed that Chinese culture and Western culture are two completely different civilizations which belong to two completely different cultural types. The differences between the two cultures have a profound impact on the economic and cultural exchanges between the two sides. Understanding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, exploring the causes of such differences and finding the convergence of Chinese and Western cultures are conducive to mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence. As a major civilized country, China calls for “peace is the most precious” and advocates harmony and seeking common ground. The development of world civilizations is a process of mutual integration, evolution and symbiosis. Therefore, we should respect differences, seek common ground while shelving differences, learn from each other, and find the convergence of different cultures and civilizations through in-depth understanding.

#### **4.4 Correct encoding and decoding**

The theory of coding and decoding was first put forward by Stuart Hall, one of the outstanding representatives of British cultural studies. He put forward the theory of encoding and decoding in his book *Encoding and Decoding in The Television Discourse*. Encoding refers to the communicator converting a message, intention, or idea into a code with specific rules through his or her own interpretation. Decoding refers to the receivers' interpreting the code according to certain rules (Gao, 2020: 82). The theory largely affects the degree of receivers' acceptance and understanding of culture. For example, the film *Mulan* was criticized by Chinese audiences due to its encoding and decoding errors in Chinese culture. Many Chinese considered that the film did not meet their expectations and did not present a comprehensive historical Chinese story. There are several encoding errors in this film.

First, the model of *Mulan* is probably a historical figure in the Northern Wei Dynasty, so it is totally unreasonable to place her in a *tulou* in Fujian province as her hometown. The first reason is that *tulou* architecture came into being only in the Song and Yuan dynasties (hundreds of years later than the Wei dynasty). And the second reason is that *tulou* was located in southern China, which is not in accord with Mulan's figure, a northern nomadic person. It was impossible for the Emperor of the Northern Dynasty to recruit a southerner to fight against Rouran invaders, which contradicts historical facts. Second, the original story is to praise Mulan's filial piety, bravery and kind qualities, as well as her passion and heroic spirit to defend her country. But Disney imposed Western standards of beauty on Mulan and turned her into a heroic figure with American characteristics. This reflects the

differences between Chinese and Western cultures; that is, western countries tend to be more individualistic, while Eastern countries are collectivist. Individualism indicates the extent to which a society is a loosely knit social framework in which people are prone to care only for themselves and their immediate families. There is more emphasis on individuals rather than groups. According to Hofstede's study, the U.S. ranked number 1 in individualism worldwide (Dou, 2011: 55). Therefore, the story of Mulan's recruitment for her father in a collectivist society is changed into a story of a woman pursuing her own identity.

Therefore, in the process of cultural communication, we should carry out correct coding and decoding and deeply explore and understand the implications of culture, thus ensuring to achieve the most positive integration. As the meaning behind the cultural phenomenon cannot be directly perceived, so we must take a rational understanding of the cultural phenomenon according to the coding rules of the cultural system to understand what it conveys and declares. Otherwise, if you use the coding rules of the cultural phenomena from your own perspective to interpret the cultural phenomena of other nations, it will inevitably lead to misinterpretation, which is the so-called cultural "collision". Therefore, when we watch foreign cultural works, we must understand the history, customs and habits of the country, understand the cultural background of the cultural works and the cultural coding rules of the cultural works.

## 5. Conclusion

The finding of this research mainly focuses on Chinese elements in the film *Mulan* and how to use Chinese elements and intercultural methods to spread Chinese culture and improve soft power. Chinese elements are the fundamental constitution of culture, from which we can see the most wonderful part of a nation. China has developed a broad and profound culture through its millennium-old history. However, with the advent of globalization, China culture should move towards the rapidly developing world (Fei, 2013: 13). We should accurately grasp the essence of Chinese culture in our creation when carrying out cultural communication. Meanwhile, our cultural perspectives determine that we will make some localized transformations of Chinese culture to shun misinterpretation and coding errors of Chinese elements. Besides, we should disseminate Chinese culture based on an in-depth understanding and study of the country's history and cultural origins. In fact, cultural collision is inevitable in the process of cross-cultural communication. In this process, it is very vital to try to find the convergence between Chinese and Western cultures, which makes foreigners easier to understand Chinese culture. Nowadays, with the blossom of the Internet, we ought to heighten cross-cultural awareness and cultural innovation ability. At present, Chinese culture is gradually going to the world, but it also has an extremely long way to go. We should be committed to cross-cultural communication of Chinese elements and enhance its influence on Chinese culture and people's sense of identity of Chinese value in the world. Due to the limits of time and the author's ability, the thesis only explores the Chinese elements in the Disney film *Mulan* and its intercultural transmission. This study can be further expanded because Chinese elements play an extremely vital role in spreading Chinese culture, and it would be better if some suggestions could be made on the basis of Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions.

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