ACROSS THE GREAT WALL:
THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF TRANSMISSION IN DISNEY’S MULAN

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ABSTRACT

Laura Pearce: Across the Great Wall: The Politics and Economics of Transmission in Disney’s Mulan
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Film adaptations of folktales have been examined from many angles, but not as a form of folktale transmission. In the era of globalization, these films play a large role, especially in transmitting folklore between cultures. As an example of this, I examine Disney’s Mulan, which brought a folktale well-known in China to an American and global audience unfamiliar with the source material. In order to understand the process and implications of Mulan’s transmission, I employ World Systems Theory and the work of Arjun Appadurai. This illuminates how the folktale was appropriated, the exchanges the film inspired, and the impact the film has had.
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Introduction

Films that adapt folktales have proven a rich source of analysis for folklorists, as well as film and literature scholars. These films, as Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix explain, “provide intertexts par excellence” (2), combining textual elements from different versions, tales, and films to give a tale a new genre or ideology. It is not surprising, then, to find that most scholarship about folklore-based films focuses on aspects of the text. In Greenhill and Matrix’s excellent collection *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, essays deal with feminism, the mixing of folktale elements with seemingly unrelated film genres, and competing cultural understandings of what makes a fairy tale. In *The Enchanted Screen: The Untold History of Fairy-Tale Films*, Jack Zipes explores the multiple film versions of numerous fairy tales, examining the ideology of the films along with their cultural and historical background. These explorations of content and context are undeniably important, especially when studying media that reach a wide audience.

But missing from much of this discussion is an examination of film as a form of transmission, a tool of mass automigration. Films can transmit the tales of one culture to an entirely different one, or provide the platform for one culture to mold a foreign tale to its own purposes. This potential to transform and distribute is not a simple, uncontested process, and not received in one way. As an example of the political and economic implications of transforming a foreign folk tale into a film through which the tale is then re-transmitted, I have chosen to examine Disney’s 1998 film *Mulan*. Before *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* broke box-office records for a subtitled movie, before *Kung Fu Panda* became a profitable franchise, Disney’s *Mulan* brought “China” to
American moviegoers. Based on a Chinese ballad thought to date back to the 5th century C.E., *Mulan* featured a strong heroine and rousing songs, and was one of the studio’s hits of the 1990s.

As an adaptation of a Chinese folk tale by a largely white American team, *Mulan*’s production and global reception reveal the political, economic, and cultural dynamics involved in translating a folktale and selling it worldwide, as well as illuminating some of the cultural transactions between an established power (America) and a nation on the brink of being able to compete with it (the People’s Republic of China). This paper will specifically deal with how Disney’s transmission of the tale of Mulan enacts American power even as it borrows from Chinese culture, but does not do so without criticism.

Disney was particularly well-positioned for this undertaking at the time. In 1989, Walt Disney Animation Studios had released *The Little Mermaid*, beginning a period of consistent, critically-acclaimed output that would continue until the end of the 1990s - a period often called the “Disney Renaissance.” In 1992, the company released *Aladdin*, the first of its major animated musicals to make use of a non-European source and setting. This trend continued with other films which incorporated elements from outside the European-American tradition Disney had historically favored - *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan*. Financially successful and globally distributed, these films demonstrated that Disney was repackaging traditional narratives not only for European-Americans, but also for an international market.

Yet for all their success, these films were vigorously contested, most clearly by the groups the films represented. Feminists saw *The Little Mermaid* as perpetuating the Disney tradition of a female lead whose life revolves around men. Arab-Americans attacked *Aladdin* for describing Middle Eastern culture as “barbaric” and violent in an introductory lyric (which was removed from subsequent versions). African Americans said they had been overlooked by *The
Lion King’s use of prominent white actors to fill many voice roles. Native Americans criticized Pocahontas for overly sexualizing its main character (Chan 236, Xu and Tian 185). Mulan came under fire for presenting a homogenous China filled with tourist attractions and Americanized food. It is unsurprising that films representing the stories or homelands of marginalized peoples would come under criticism by those same people. It is easy for those in power to perpetuate oppressive systems, and hard to reverse them.

Consideration of problematic Hollywood films, and especially Disney films, however, tends to focus on what the film says to and about the domestic American audience. Often overlooked in this discussion is the fact that these are globalized products, with different audiences and levels of success around the world. A film like Mulan involves a complicated process of exchange, both in the creation of the film and its reception in its “home” country. These dynamics have much to say about power relations, economic and cultural integration and contestation, and the ways countries perceive each other. Specifically, viewing these dynamics through the lenses on globalization provided by Immanuel Wallerstein and Arjun Appadurai allows us to examine the production and reception in light of the ways that economic and political inequality are both perpetuated and contested in different areas of our globalized culture. Mulan also provides particular insight into Sino-U.S. relations in the 1990s and the issues involved in adapting not only a general style from another culture (as Dreamworks’s Kung-Fu Panda does), but a beloved national legend that is deeply implicated in Chinese peoples’ notions of their own history and culture. In the case of Mulan, the exchange is neither completely equitable nor successful, demonstrating the ways in which a folktale can be used and claimed during and after its “Disneyfication.”
The late 1980s and 1990s saw, alongside the resurgence of its animation, an expansion of the Disney Company’s interests in leisure activities worldwide. While Tokyo Disney Resort had been licensed and opened in the first half of the 1980s, later projects were taken on by the Disney Company itself. Disneyland Paris, a vehemently contested project, was announced in the 1980s and opened to the public in 1992. The Disney Cruise Line, which travels the Caribbean, Central America, and Europe in addition to the waters surrounding the United States, was launched in 1998, the year of Mulan’s release (“Parks and Resorts”). In 1999, the initial plans for Disney’s first park in China, Hong Kong Disneyland, were announced (Katemopoulos). It is possible that the deal for this park was already in its initial planning stages when Disney decided to make Mulan, it is almost certain that it was on the minds of executives when Mulan was released. Considerations like this demonstrate the prevalence of globalized thinking and planning (and the desire to profit from it) in the realm of media, regardless of which tradition that media draws from.

“The history of folklore research…and the socio-political implications of folklore studies have all been seen within national boundaries,” Sadhana Naithani explained in The Story-Time of the British Empire (1) (a work that attempts to dissolve at least some of those boundaries). The study of transmission in particular has been affected by the national focus of early scholars. For example, discussions of dissemination from Stith Thompson’s The Folktale to Georges and Jones’s Folkloristics devote substantial parts of their review to the historic-geographic method. This method, of tracing the diffusion of a particular tale through variants, was often employed in order to uncover “national” tales, or to claim a tale as having a particular national origin. As folklore has, rightfully, shifted from considering folktales as a relic of the past to a regarding
them as a process people enact in the present, the historic-geographic method has largely fallen by the wayside. Unfortunately, transmission has fallen into neglect along with it, although patterns of transmission have the potential to illuminate how cultures view each other and how disparities of power are enacted in the cultural realm. This is not to dismiss the necessary assessment of the message a film like Mulan sends to its home audience of American children. Rather, it is to say that studies of international dynamics, and the accompanying question of appropriation, must also be part of folklore studies. Throughout this paper, I draw upon approaches from political science and anthropology in order to understand the workings and implications of transmission in today’s global media. I have found these approaches to be particularly relevant in highlighting the workings and implications of unequal exchange, and in breaking down the different areas of culture and society where the media’s effects, and thus transmission of the tale, can be seen. Mulan is my case study, but the approach could easily be applied to other films, books, television shows, and any contemporary media which transmits folklore between cultures.

The Legend

The legend of Mulan is one of the most enduring and widely-known tales in Chinese culture. The plot is simple: Mulan, the eldest child in her family, hears that her father is to be drafted into the army, although he is not physically capable of participating in a military campaign. As her younger brother is not old enough to take her father’s place, Mulan goes out, purchases necessary equipment, and joins the army herself as the representative of her family that the government requires. She spends ten years campaigning, at the end of which she receives many honors and is offered an official post. She refuses the post in favor of returning home.
When she arrives home, she puts on a dress and makeup and astonishes her comrades, who had not been aware that she was a woman.

The story’s origin is typically traced to a folk song, “The Ballad of Mulan,” which is thought to have originated during the Northern Wei dynasty (5th century C.E.), although there is some dispute over this and the oldest surviving records of the ballad come from later periods. Following its presentation in such works as the Song dynasty (11th and 12th centuries C.E.) Yuefu Shiji, a collection of folk songs and poetry in the same style, “The Ballad of Mulan” enjoyed great popularity. It inspired Tang poems retelling the story, Ming dramas, Qing novels, and local operas in various regions. While details of Mulan’s background or time in the army were frequently added in these adaptations, as well as anachronisms such as Mulan having bound feet, the adaptations rested on the same storytelling frame as the ballad. At the same time that Mulan provided a source for popular fiction, scholars who insisted that Mulan had been a historical figure attempted to locate her hometown, and towns sought to claim her as their own.

In the 20th century, Mulan achieved even greater popularity as the heroine of multiple films, beginning in 1927 with two competing films, Mulan Joins the Army and Hua Mulan Joins the Army. Film adaptations continued throughout the century in both the People’s Republic of China, which saw an adaptation of a Yu opera version in the 1950s, and British-controlled Hong Kong, where the prolific Shaw Brothers studio adapted the tale in the 1960s (Dong 159). Mulan received further support from the Communist regime in the People’s Republic of China, which included “The Ballad of Mulan” in elementary school textbooks. The 20th century, particularly the latter half, also saw an ideological shift in retellings of the tale. While many earlier versions had emphasized the duty of an individual to support their family (and especially a child to support their parents), modern versions of Mulan increasingly placed emphasis on the duty of the
citizen to support their state (Edwards). Louise Edwards explains this change as “the evolution of a ‘modern’ Mulan shows the emergence of the ‘national family’ (214)”.

While this shift in the placement of ultimate loyalty is politically telling, both forms of duty are aspects of the virtue of filial piety that Mulan has embodied over centuries.

In spite of the story’s popularity in Sinophone regions, Mulan was relatively unknown to English-speakers in the United States until the 1970s. The story began to gain recognition with the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1975 memoir *The Woman Warrior*, which features a chapter, entitled “White Tigers,” in which a young Kingston envisions an elaborate version of the story that is politically charged, with strong feminist and even Marxist elements. This chapter is typically the most recognized and celebrated portion of the memoir, and is sometimes taught in literature classes independent of the rest of the book. Mulan gained further traction in the U.S. during the 1990s through a number of children’s picture books that adapted the tale, although a number of these were aimed more specifically at bilingual audiences. All of these versions, however, were limited in scope compared to the distribution, advertisement, and multi-media presence Disney would bring to bear.

The Disney Film

The project that became *Mulan* was initially planned as a direct-to-video short entitled *China Doll*, in which a suffering Chinese girl would be rescued and taken to the West by a British officer. Picture book author Robert D. San Souci, a frequent Disney consultant who was working on his own book based on the ballad (*Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior*), suggested to the *China Doll* team that the Mulan story could provide the basis for a film. In the wake of the success of films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, whose rebellious heroines had found a wide audience in parents who desired more active role models
for their daughters, Disney sought to use much of its existing material to create new hits.¹ As a result, the China Doll project was turned into Mulan (Brown and Shapiro).

The resulting story drew on the ballad and Kingston’s retelling, as well as developing its own elements. A measure of the ballad’s plot was retained, most clearly in the beginning and conclusion of the film (Mulan’s impetus to disguise herself and join the army, and her decision to return home rather than accepting an official position in the capital), while elements from Kingston’s reworking (specifically, the threat of death if Mulan is discovered to be a woman) were invoked in order to heighten the drama. This reliance on multiple texts and interpretations is a common approach to fairy-tale films (Zipes 8). Disney evidently desired to frame Mulan as a fairy tale by giving it the structure and genre markings (nonhuman sidekicks, musical numbers) of previous Disney fairy tale films. Famous folklorist Jack Zipes explains the remolding and rejection of one text in fairy-tale films as usually being the result of the fact that there is no one text to turn to, and the creators have usually been exposed to multiple versions prior to creating their own (8). Yet in the case of Mulan this process is relatively unknown - had the creators been exposed to different versions of the tale prior to making the film, or was the rejection of any one (Chinese) version above others a more deliberate choice? Given the relative obscurity of Mulan in the West before Disney, it appears to be a case of appropriating “suitable” story elements while rejecting elements that may have been more representative of the original culture. This becomes particularly noticeable considering that the tale of Mulan is treated more as a legend than fairy tale in China – it is historically grounded and the heroine succeeds without any magical helpers.

¹ The actual agency displayed by these heroines is, of course, a matter for debate. Nevertheless, Ariel, Belle, and others were often seen as taking more active roles in their own stories.
In the years-long process of making the film, the production team made a point to acknowledge China. Perhaps in a bid to head off criticism from the Chinese similar to the criticism _Aladdin_ had faced from people of Middle Eastern background, directors, writers, and animators embarked on a research trip to China while the film was being developed. They visited notable tourist attractions from the Great Wall to the caves at Yan’an where Mao lived during the Second World War, along with Northern Wei archeological sites. Barry Cook, who co-directed _Mulan_ with Tony Bancroft, explains the purpose of the trip in the DVD’s special features: “We wanted to show icons of what we would expect of China, so we knew we wanted to see the Great Wall, we knew we wanted to see the hills in Guilin…” While billed as a method of making the film “authentic,” the spots visited and the language surrounding the trip betray the touristic impulses embedded in the project and resulting film. It is China as it is _expected_, a narrow view in keeping with Western preconceptions. To a certain extent, this is a function of film when utilizing settings foreign to the primary audience – as American films about Paris must feature the Eiffel Tower, so American films about China must feature the Great Wall. It does, however, reveal an intent not to produce a culturally and historically accurate work, but a film that “looks Chinese” to American eyes.

The production ultimately involved artists of a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds. The screenplay team of five people included two women and one Chinese-American (Rita Hsiao), character design was headed by Taiwanese artist Chen-Yi Chang, and the production designer was the German-born Hans Bacher. The voice talent was, ultimately, similarly mixed. The role of Mulan was played by Macau-born actress Ming-Na Wen in speech, and Filipino actress and singer Lea Salonga in song. The rest of the cast included notable Asian-American actors (B.D. Wong), African-American actors (Eddie Murphy), and Caucasian actors and singers.
(Donny Osmond, Harvey Fierstein). The production is careful to acknowledge the source culture, but *Mulan* is ultimately a globalized product, produced by a global company.

Pursuit of a globalized “universal” is clearly reflected in Disney’s story. *Mulan* relates the tale of a clever, tomboyish girl coming into her own. Mulan causes a catastrophe at a matchmaking ceremony, unable to be appropriately feminine. When her crippled and elderly father is called to join the army in defense against the invading Huns, Mulan poses as a man to take her father’s place. Initially weak and rejected, she trains hard and becomes a soldier respected by her comrades. When the Huns wipe out the main army, Mulan’s quick thinking allows her to create an avalanche that defends her company from the Huns, and she saves her commanding officer’s life. In a twist unique to the Disney film, she is injured, and revealed to be a woman. While she is not killed, she is abandoned, leaving her alone to discover that the core of the Hun army survived. The climax of the film takes place in the Forbidden City, as an undisguised Mulan rallies her comrades to defeat the Huns and save the emperor. Mulan successfully deals with the Hun leader in spite of his skepticism that a woman could defeat him, and is offered an official post, which she refuses in order to return to her family. A romantic future with her commanding officer is implied. Rather than focus on the themes of filial piety and self-sacrifice (as the ballad does), or place emphasis foremost on issues of feminism and social critique (as Kingston did), *Mulan* opts for the main themes of finding your place, accepting yourself, and experiencing personal growth typical of Western coming-of-age stories. This is an appeal to an American and global audience. Such a focus is typical of a culture in power reinterpreting a text from the less powerful. Naithani notes that “a peculiar feature of colonial folkloristics” is “that it dissociated the folklores concerned from their associated meanings, and presented them as texts open for universal interpretation” (86-87).
To a large extent, this appeal was a success. On its release in 1998, the film became a major box office success, earning over $100 million in the United States alone and approximately $300 million worldwide, with adaptations in thirty-five languages and several awards (Dong 164). Its reception in the PRC, however, was troubled. Initially rejected by the government for a spot among the ten Hollywood films per year officially imported at the time (due in no small part to the government’s anger over Disney’s involvement in *Kundun*, a film about the Dalai Lama), *Mulan* was allowed in only after extensive campaigning by Disney (Chan 242). Even then, the film was given a post-holiday release date (following the Spring Festival, or Chinese New Year) that made family attendance unlikely due to children returning to school and families scaling back after the travel and expense of the holiday (Langfitt). After opening in 1999, *Mulan* is estimated to have earned decidedly less than $2 million in the PRC, making a mere sixth of its anticipated returns there in spite of the inclusion of stars like Jackie Chan in the Mandarin and Cantonese dubs (Chan 242). This performance was notable when compared to other Disney films, such as *The Lion King*, which had earned nearly $5 million in the PRC four years prior (itsboxoffice.com). While it appeared that children reacted more or less positively to the film, adults were often reported as being uncomfortable with it, finding it too foreign or disagreeing with its choice of message (Chan 242).

**Landscapes and World Systems**

In order to understand *Mulan*’s significance as a global product and the different levels on which it has been transmitted and contested, I have found it necessary to step outside purely folkloric theories of transmission. The international dynamics involved have caused me to turn to political science and anthropology, and specifically to World Systems Theory and the writings of Arjun Appadurai.
World Systems Theory, a political science approach, helps illuminate the relationship between the United States and China that plays out in Mulan’s production and distribution. The theory, initially developed by Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s, holds that the modern world consists of a capitalist, interstate system that began developing as Europe left the medieval period and has since expanded to encompass the globe. The world of the system can be divided into types of economic zones— the “core” and the “periphery,” with the “semi-periphery” forming a third zone in the eyes of some theorists. According to Wallerstein’s model, activity in the core is capital-intensive, producing products that require a high level of technology. Its greatest demands are on resources. The workforce earns, and is able to demand, relatively high wages. Activity in the periphery, by contrast, is labor-intensive, involving the use of lower-level technology. Its greatest demands are on its workers. Workers in the periphery earn low wages and cannot successfully demand higher ones. The core exports its goods to the periphery, and demands the periphery export to it in exchange. The semi-periphery engages in both core-like and periphery-like activities, exporting periphery-like goods to the core and core-like goods to the periphery (Shannon, 33-34). The semi-periphery is uniquely positioned in the system, as it has the potential to move into the periphery or core, and the resources to exert itself like a core nation on periphery nations and to resist the influence of the core more thoroughly the periphery is able to.

However, World Systems Theory, as Arjun Appadurai argues in “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” is inadequate to fully address the multiple levels on which global cultural exchange occurs. The system of cultural exchange is “a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (Appadurai 51), which means that any exploration must take into account the multiple dimensions of exchange that Appadurai poses in order to observe both the
extent of transmission and the response to it. These dimensions are: ethnoscape (the mobile
groups of people who create the various components of cities and states), mediascape (print,
electronic, and other forms of disseminating images and narratives), technoscape (various
innovations and information relating to or made possible by them), financescape (primarily the
flow of capital, but also wages and other concerns), and ideoscape (ideologies, primarily political,
found in much the same environment as the mediascape) (Appadurai, 33-36). Appadurai’s
landscapes isolate the workings of particular aspects of the complex phenomenon that is
globalization in the cultural realm. This lens allows examination of global transmission at
different stages and in different areas. It is important to remember, however, that these
landscapes are interconnected. Most importantly, just as World Systems Theory’s landscape of
core and periphery must be supplemented by the various spheres provided by Appadurai, so too
do the workings of those spheres need to be examined in the light of movement between the core,
periphery, and semi-periphery.

The mediascape, financescape, and ideoscape are particularly relevant areas in which
films, particularly films with strong financial backing and global distribution, move, and the
ethnoscape proves relevant to the study of works such as Mulan. Disney films, (especially their
folktale adaptations) are regularly read in terms of the message they send to U.S. viewers, but
much less often as the international products of a multinational company which they are. Viewed
in such a way, Mulan may be read as a bid by the core (the U.S.) for control over the mediascape,
financescape, and ideoscape, as its version of a semi-peripheral narrative becomes globally
dominant. Such a bid need not be a conscious decision, but may rather come about simply as a
function of exercising its core status in pursuit of its own interests. Yet its successes in the
financescape and ideoscape were not uncontested, as the film failed to make significant money in
the People’s Republic of China and its content was contested in both the U.S. and China. The question of the ethnoscape complicates the matter further, as Chinese-Americans were involved in the production and the film was well-received in the more core-aligned Sinophone areas of Taiwan and Hong Kong, emphasizing that movement among cultures and differing reactions among similar cultures have significant effects, as is discussed later.

The People’s Republic of China is a semi-periphery nation, having risen to that status before *Mulan* was produced. The United States is, of course, a core nation. This relationship complicates the flow of resources (the tale and other cultural elements) and goods (the resulting film). The United States is able to treat the PRC as a periphery nation (a source from which “raw material” is obtained to be turned into a more profitable product) while the PRC is able to partially resist such treatment (giving *Mulan* a disadvantageous release time and disappointing box office figures). This demonstrates that the relationship between China and the U.S. is not a simple flow of two and from, but involves a certain amount of conversation.

This theoretical lens is useful for viewing a globalized product, such as a Hollywood film. As the references to different national approaches and box-office figures show, the theory is best suited to a work that is crossing national and economic boundaries. A work that crosses boundaries within one culture and market would be beyond the scope of this approach, and must be developed elsewhere.

**China in Contemporary Historical Context**

Since the turn of the millennium, coverage of the PRC in the United States has focused primarily on the PRC’s phenomenal economic growth and the possibility that this growth might threaten the U.S.’s position as a world leader. A casual search online reveals such news articles as “Americans: China is an Economic Threat,” which discusses a 2012 poll in which a majority
of Americans cited China’s economic growth and holding of U.S. debt as a national liability. Opinion pieces that treat the PRC as an economic and ideological opponent of the West, such as Heriberto Araújo and Juan Pablo Cardenal’s “China’s Economic Empire” published by *The New York Times* in 2013, abound.

Such discussion obscures the PRC’s position as a semi-periphery, not core, state. In its “China Overview,” the World Bank states that “China remains a developing country,” citing low per capita income, the nearly one billion people still below its national poverty line, and demographic concerns. According to the International Monetary Fund’s 2012 data, the PRC’s GDP in terms of purchasing power parity is a mere $9,055, less than 20% the U.S.’s $51,704 (World Economic Outlook Database). And while the PRC has steadily risen up the United Nations’ Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index, as of 2012 it remains behind its neighbor Mongolia, let alone the United States. The PRC’s rapid growth and contributions to the world economy must not be discounted, but neither should they be used to overstate its current role in the world system.

Beginning in 1993 and ending with its 1998 release, *Mulan’s* five year production process took place while the PRC was only on the brink of rising and not yet growing as it has in the 21st century. The 1990s were also a turbulent time in Sino-U.S. relations. Following the opening of China in the 1970s, American perception of Chinese society and its government had become more positive in the 1980s. Part of this positive perception was the result of the American expectation that the PRC would grow more democratic. American sentiment toward the PRC changed in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, which caused Americans to consider China more autocratic and less successful than they had in the 1980s

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2 Some analysis does treat China as a “core” nation, but these studies tend to be focused on a regional context, not on the global political economy.
Sanctions on the sales of military and police equipment were imposed, although those sanctions could be modified by the President as he saw fit (and presidents have regularly done so since). Further anxiety arose in the U.S. as the return of Hong Kong, a major economic power, to the PRC approached. Disney mitigated much of the risk of adapting a Chinese story by focusing firmly on a “traditional” Chinese past, which was still positively viewed by Americans and treated as lacking strong political connotations.

The times were troubled within the PRC as well. Deng Xiaoping’s economic and ideological reforms in the late 1980s had refocused Chinese discourse on the role of markets and consumer goods. Ownership became encouraged rather than anathema. With the decreased emphasis on correct Communist ideology, literature and film shifted towards becoming mass entertainment, rather than political statements. The rise of the private sector and decrease in state economic activity set back the progress of women. In the party-controlled economy, women had been assured steady employment (albeit often in low-paying teaching or factory jobs). The market reforms beginning in the 1980s led to increased unemployment among women, as the private sector encouraged women to retire early or refused to hire them at all on the basis that the company would make a “loss” should the women require maternity leave (Rai 187-188). The 1990s were a period in which China and the Chinese were reconfiguring identity, attempting to find a way to compete with the West without being colonized by it again. The reception of Mulan shows that the PRC’s increasing interaction with the West and acceptance of aspects of the Western lifestyle did not translate into a wholesale adoption of Western models, regardless of how relevant those models may have been made to appear.

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3 The period during which the European powers, the U.S., and Japan colonized different parts of China (dating roughly from the first Opium War in the first half of the 19th century to the establishment of the PRC in 1949) is known as the “century of humiliation.” Many within China still consider the nation to be recovering from this period, making China’s ability to become a global power in its own right the only way to fully overcome the degrading era of colonization.
Perhaps the most readily visible realm of Appadurai’s model, and certainly the most quantifiable, relating to a product such as *Mulan* is the financescape. The financescape is made up of the flow of capital, it takes into account the investment in and return on a product (in this case, a film). The reactions of different national markets are particularly worth noting.

In terms of the global financescape, *Mulan* reveals the focus of core production on internal markets and cleavages between nations and cultures created by differing economic status. As has been made evident by the touristic approach to viewing China and the “mining” of China for appropriate cultural resources, Disney’s first priority was marketing *Mulan* to a Western audience, with global markets a secondary consideration. This likely comes as no surprise to an American viewer, but it belies the interest in foreign markets that *Mulan*’s source material and Disney’s expansion appeared to indicate. That the audience was envisioned as American above all is brought home both by artistic choices (referencing Americanized Chinese cuisine, the use of distinctly American stars such as Eddie Murphy) and by the numbers following the release of the film - over a third of its total revenue was earned in the United States.

Thus while *Mulan* was globally released and incorporated elements and talent from around the world, it is first and foremost an American product. This Americanization is not only the result of a process of cultural hybridization⁴, in which globalization is taken as a way to produce a box office success (see: Wang and Yeh, 2005), it is the direct result of a decision to appeal to one market above others, despite Disney’s avowed intention to respect and appeal to foreign cultures. Admittedly, the core does dominate the financescape of film consumption. The

⁴ Cultural hybridization, according to Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, involves the mutual transformation of the cultural elements involved to create something new. In the case of *Mulan*, they determine that hybridity is surface-level only, providing Chinese “flavor” without significantly deviating from Disney formulas in terms of plot and character. This kind of hybridity is compared directly to international advertisements.
U.S./Canada market is easily the most profitable, with a high proportion of viewers and theaters available. (Even in 2013, the Chinese market’s strongest year yet, the Motion Picture Association of America placed revenue earned from China at 33% of the earnings in the U.S. and Canada.) However, the choice to focus on this audience still clearly places an emphasis on Americans, in the core, as the primary consumers of culture, regardless of the origin of that piece of culture. And so China’s position as *peripheral* in comparison to core nations such as the U.S. is reaffirmed. China is good enough to draw resources from, but not to consider as a primary market.

*Mulan*’s appeal to the core (and, perhaps, the dominance of American culture in the core) is further demonstrated by the reception the film received in more core-aligned Sinophone areas. The film had better box office returns in Taiwan and Hong Kong, two of the “Four Asian Tigers” whose economies have been developed for a longer time and have more global integration than that of the PRC (a difference even more notable in the 1990s). There are a number of possible explanations for this - Hong Kong and Taiwan have had longer and more significant exposure to Hollywood products. But their status as successful capitalist economies may also be a factor. One could speculate that the emphasis on individual success in Disney’s *Mulan* is common in capitalist, and particularly American, narratives (the works of Horatio Alger come to mind), which may find a more willing audience in core-aligned spaces.

**Ideoscape**

A more nebulous, yet clearly visible, area in which *Mulan* was contested is the ideoscape. *Mulan* was seen, around the world, as promoting a particular agenda. Which agenda was being promoted depended on the viewer’s interpretation, but it was never art for art’s sake. As soon as
it was released, *Mulan* sparked debate over the representation of China and the Chinese, as well as raising questions of what qualifies a piece of media as “feminist.” This debate about the film’s potential implications in the ideoscape was carried out in newspapers and academic journals in the U.S. and the PRC. As this discussion centered on questions of race, empire, orientalism, and gender, it was undeniably about political ideology.

The immediate critical reception in the U.S. was divided. Some critics declared the film to be a positive portrayal of China while others dismissed it as insincere. *Rolling Stone*’s Peter Travers declared that “the film shines at capturing the watercolor delicacy of China’s past,” referring to traditional ink paintings and other elements of traditional China with which American viewers might be most comfortable. Travers also implied that *Mulan* contained a level of authenticity by pointing out the time the artists spent in China. On the other hand, Janet Maslin, writing for *The New York Times*, observed that the film “often seems about as Chinese as chop suey,” citing distinctly American references and Eddie Murphy’s character.

Still, the representation of Chinese culture and history was not a primary concern for American reviewers, who were frequently more engaged with the questions of *Mulan*’s feminist ambitions and its production quality when compared to other Disney renaissance films. Roger Ebert noted that *Mulan* trod a middle ground in representing its heroine, coupling “standard feminist empowerment” with a typical (albeit understated) Disney romance. He ended his review by comparing the film favorably to *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, driving home the idea that *Mulan*’s place in the Disney canon is the ultimate evaluation of its worth.

The English-language academic responses, however, have been more politically inclined. In their introduction to the special Asian American children’s literature issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn’s* (a journal devoted to children’s literature), Dolores de Manuel and Rocio G. Davis
criticize the film for promoting an homogenous view of China, essentializing and Orientalizing a complex culture and nation with Western stereotypes. Vincent Cheng, an Asian-American scholar specifically examining the question of “authenticity” in culture, decries Disney’s production as selling a carefully exoticized China while marketing it as authentic (76). In her conclusion to the book *Mulan’s Legend and Legacy in China and the United States*, Lan Dong takes a measured view of Disney’s *Mulan*. Dong considers it a natural extension of the long line of retellings the story has experienced over the centuries, versions that often reflect contemporary concepts of identity and conflicted notions of the role of women in society. Dong’s discussion of the ballad’s likely non-Han Chinese origins brings to light the issue of erasure. The merging of all the “good guys” in the film into one ethnic group (associated with Han institutions and thus presumably Han) is problematic in both American and Chinese contexts. As de Manuel and Davis noted, the erasure of Chinese diversity serves to help make one palatable, marketable “Other.” And while there was little if any discussion of this aspect of the film in China (aside from audience members who felt the characters looked too Korean or Japanese), the depiction in film of China as uniformly Han is troublesome when the nation’s many ethnic minorities are often underrepresented or passed over in favor of the Han majority in the real world.

Scholars born and educated in China have offered opinions on *Mulan* in both English and Chinese. Joseph M. Chan fully acknowledges the Americanization of the story but ultimately sees *Mulan* as a positive example of “transculturation”- sharing and adapting between cultures. Chan also points to the constructive aspects of the film’s message in defying certain Western stereotypes (the submissive Asian woman) and offering a female role model. Mingwu Xu and Chuanmao Tian, however, see the film’s storyline and characters as enacting a process of
“cultural deformation” that replaces Chinese values (most notably filial piety) with American ones (such as individualism and romantic love) and thus rewrites the core message of the story. In an overview of the legend and the changes it has undergone over the centuries, Baohe Wu paints a favorable picture of Disney’s *Mulan*, stating that both an ancient Chinese and modern globalized version of the tale can exist, and be valuable cultural assets for China at home and abroad. As for Chinese reviewers, it appears many of them were skeptical of the work. A reviewer for *Beijing Youth Daily*, a widely-read party-supported paper, criticized the film for characterizing its heroine as rebellious, out-of-keeping with the original legend. *Mulan* was easy to see as “foreign” (Chan 242).  

In the United States, the film has served as a cultural touchstone for many of the Millennial generation who were children at the time of its release. Mulan proved particularly inspiring for many girls, who admired her active role in her story and her willingness to fight. *Mulan* has also featured in the narratives of queer women for playing a part in their increasing awareness of their attraction to other women. While not as critically popular or widely influential as some other Disney Renaissance films (such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Lion King*), *Mulan* nevertheless had a distinct cultural impact.

**Ethnoscape**

The ethnoscape of a film may be considered in two ways. There is the ethnic and national makeup of the production staff, and whose voices from it are most likely to be heard. But there is also the audience, which may be made of different groups (or, different groups may be specifically marketed to). *Mulan* demonstrates awareness in terms of the ethnoscape of its U.S. audience, but fails to take foreign ethnoscapes into account.

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5 While further reviews from the PRC, as well as from Hong Kong and Taiwan, would be relevant to this paper, I have not been able to access archives from 1999.
The variety of talent from around the world involved in *Mulan* has been previously discussed, and is part of what marks Disney as a globalized company with global aspirations. Certain aspects of the film, however, appear to be an attempt to speak to the East Asian diaspora in the core. This is indicative of the shifting ethnoscape as Asian-Americans have become more visible and travel between China and the U.S. has become more common.

The inclusion of Japanese-American as well as Chinese-American voice talent indicates Disney’s desire to appeal to American concepts of race (which tend to create a monolithic “Asia”), rather than limiting themselves to a Sinophone target demographic. This also shows Disney’s interest in the ethnoscape of the core and disinterest or ignorance regarding the ethnoscape of the semi-periphery. In the U.S., East Asian immigrants tend to be treated as a single group and essentialized together, as Chinese martial artists are equated with Japanese ninjas. This view is a point of contention in the Asian-American community, where some argue for pan-Asian solidarity while others insist on greater recognition for their distinct identity. In China (and Japan, which may be economically part of the core but is apparently culturally “Other” enough that Disney need not tread carefully in casting), differences between East Asian nations are clearly marked and each is considered distinct and separate. The conflation of China and Japan is especially problematic, as the two nations are extremely hostile towards each other and frequently in conflict. The Chinese continue to resent Japan’s incursions into China during the Second World War, a fact which makes territorial disputes and Japan’s economic influence hotly contested. Acts in Japan such as Japanese officials visiting shrines that honor war criminals are often met with anti-Japanese protests at embassies and stores in China. Such animosities need consideration when taking a film abroad.
Mulan may also have been a canny marketing move based on trends in the U.S. ethnoscape. China began to allow U.S. citizens to adopt Chinese children in 1988, and the number of adoptions since then numbers in the tens of thousands (Andrew 123). The U.S. State Department adoption statistics for 1999 show that in that year 4,108 children were adopted from China, a mere 273 behind the 4,381 adopted from Russia, making it the second-most popular source for international adoptions. 98% of these Chinese children were girls. Mulan, a story about a strong Chinese girl, appears designed to appeal to American parents who want to expose their adopted daughters to Chinese culture without its being too Chinese.

Mediascape

The mediascape is a vast sphere, of which film is only one part. Disney’s Mulan is an instance of a particular type of media, but it is intensely connected to others. Media surround the film in the form of advertising and news coverage, and media followed the film in merchandising and a direct-to-video sequel. Moreover, Mulan has been referenced in other stories (film and television) both in the U.S. and abroad.

The American mediascape is a broad and broadly-based construction that takes international elements and talent and distributing them domestically and worldwide. In the words of Jospeh M. Chan, “to Hollywood, what is local is American and what is American is global.” This presumption results in the touristic appropriation we have seen enacted with Mulan, as well as a complex relationship with the ethnoscape, financescape, and ideoscape. While all of these areas can and should be examined individually for what they reveal about cultural interactions, they are inevitably linked.

This is observable in the fact that Mulan’s true potential in the ideoscape of the core is borne out through its continued presence in the mediascape - the influence and reuse of the film
in new pieces of media. *Mulan*’s success does not seem to have inspired more children’s movies to turn to Chinese or other non-Western sources (certainly not Disney, who have returned to Europe with *Tangled* and *Frozen*). Rather, *Mulan* has become a tool to allow the mediascape to reflect ideas that have received much attention in American discourse. The television series *Once Upon a Time*, aired by the Disney-owned channel ABC, draws strongly on Disney fairy and folk tale adaptations for its characters and story. *Once Upon a Time* has included Mulan as a recurring character, who was eventually revealed to be in love with Princess Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* fame. The explicit queering of Mulan is a choice that displays American experience relating to the film and relates to current American discourse, reflecting the prominence of LGBTQ rights and marriage equality in American ideoscape and mediascape (and raising the need for queer studies of the film). Such issues do not currently have the same prominence in the ideoscape of the PRC.

*Mulan* has also been used by American media as an icon of feminism, as seen in an article by the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. In “Disney CEO Figures They’ve Built up Enough Goodwill to do a Real Sexist One,” the company’s CEO Bob Iger is “quoted” as saying, “‘No one asks for Mulan wearing shapeless warrior’s armor for Christmas. So we’re putting the next one in sparkly heels, a tiara, and a form-fitting dress slit to the thigh.’” *Mulan* is seen as continuing to set a standard for feminist representation and a model for Disney heroines that aren’t sexist (while, in fact, Mulan is often overlooked in Disney merchandise).

Chinese adaptations of *Mulan* following the Disney film, however, demonstrate that the Chinese mediascape is in dialogue with the American. 2010’s *Hua Mulan* (also known as *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior*), a big-budget historical war epic, contains a number of scenes and plot points that appear to have been designed to reference and then subvert the Disney storyline. The earliest
of these is a scene in which Mulan goes to a pool to bathe in secret. In Disney’s Mulan, this results in one of the film’s comedic interludes (an established Disney technique), as Mulan is unexpectedly followed by her comrades and has to move past her embarrassment in order to talk and trick her way out of the water without being discovered. Hua Mulan makes the scene much less humorous, as Mulan has to fight the comrade who unexpectedly joined her before she can escape. In this case, her gender is discovered, but her face is unseen, saving her comrade (and eventual love interest) from discovering her identity until a more dramatic point in the story.

Another example of subverting the Disney narrative is when a fight late in both films between Mulan’s forces and their enemies causes Mulan to be injured. In the Disney film, this results in the army’s discovery of Mulan’s gender. In Hua Mulan, the injury initially seems to be leading the story in the same direction, as it is similarly located on her chest and would reveal her masquerade to anyone treating her. But ultimately Mulan treats the wound herself and her secret remains safe. The wound does very little to advance Mulan’s characterization and has no real bearing on the plot - the episode seems almost to have been put there expressly to subvert an element of the Disney film.

While both Hua Mulan and Disney’s Mulan have a love interest alongside whom Mulan fights, the Disney film ends with a hopeful reunion that suggests a romantic relationship will follow, while Hua Mulan ends with the lovers parting, unfulfilled, as the man heads off for a political marriage that Mulan helped arrange for the good of the nation. The final scene of Hua Mulan stands in pointed contrast to Disney’s. Both feature the arrival of the love interest to Mulan’s home, but while in Disney’s Mulan he is invited to stay, in Hua Mulan Mulan herself sends him away so that he can perform his duty to the country by marrying the princess of the formerly enemy tribe. As a response to Disney, Hua Mulan both contests and confirms the spread
of the American mediascape. *Hua Mulan* injects greater emphasis on historical accuracy, filial piety, and Mulan’s heroic self-sacrifice into the story, emphasizing virtues that many claim Disney overlooked. Like Disney’s *Mulan*, it is a film primarily designed for a domestic audience. But the film reveals the differences in the scope and influence of the mediascape of the core as compared to the semi-periphery. While the production of *Hua Mulan* was a Chinese-U.S. joint venture, its only substantial market was in China. And while it earned over $12 million in the PRC (imdb.com), more than 6 times the take Disney’s *Mulan* had there, it did not benefit from a global advertising campaign and repackaging for foreign audiences as a Disney product does.

As a semi-periphery mediascape, China is limited to contesting American products locally, rather than globally. Furthermore, while continued representations of Mulan in the core American mediascape respond simply to the Disney film and issues relevant to consumers, the mediascape of semi-periphery China must respond to the core’s production, even as the values endorsed in its narrative are aimed firmly at China. Negating the Disney narrative is still responding to it, and so *Hua Mulan* demonstrates both the omnipresence of the American mediascape as well as the determined contestation of that power.

**Conclusions**

Disney’s *Mulan* and its reception is a particular phenomenon, apparently influenced by the time, the nations involved, and the choice of tale. The PRC had only begun to allow the official import of Hollywood films in 1994, lifting a ban that had been in place since the establishment of the PRC 45 years earlier (McCutchan 9). One of the main explanations for the ban had been to resist Westernization. It is hardly surprising, then, that an audience still accustomed to the isolated culture of the past half century in the PRC would react negatively to
seeing a key cultural text “Westernized.” Hong Kong and Taiwan, by contrast, were already accustomed to Hollywood products.

Yet just ten years later, Dreamworks’s *Kung Fu Panda* would find an enthusiastic audience in the PRC, with many responding positively to the Chinese elements in the art and characters of the film, in spite of its equally Western coming-of-age narrative. The same year, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, which featured an American teenager participating in a quest inspired by the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*\(^6\), also experienced box office success, due primarily to the star power of Jackie Chan and Jet Li. Does a decade account for such a dramatic difference, when *Mulan* had many of the same elements to help it along? Given the rapid pace of development in China, where a city can be rendered unrecognizable in just a few years, perhaps a decade can. But it is evident that the pushback against *Mulan* was not only a reaction against Hollywood by an audience not yet accustomed to it - Jackie Chan’s *Rush Hour* did relatively well in China at nearly the same time (Langfitt). Instead, the reception is a reaction against this retelling of this folktale, in 1998.

Disney was successful in transmitting the story of Mulan to a new audience in the U.S. and other nations around the world. While some thematic content was changed, some key story elements were retained, and that story proved popular. Disney has turned Mulan into an internationally-recognized heroine. Disney’s transmission is undeniably self-interested, but it has also served to make outside audiences aware of an aspect of Chinese tradition they may not have known of otherwise - its martial heroines. It is Disney’s attempt to re-transmit the story to an audience already familiar with the tale that shows the film’s flaws. Chinese moviegoers rejected

\(^6\) *Journey to the West* is one of the few works of fiction in the classical Chinese canon, but like other novels of its stature is also widely visible in folk and popular culture. Episodes from the novel are told by storytellers across China according to regional styles, and it has provided Chinese filmmakers with a host of plots to work from. *Journey to the West* is also enjoyed in other parts of East Asia, with popular Japanese manga drawing on its characters and story elements.
this Mulan, this foreigner. Indeed, Langfitt reported that “foreign Mulan” was a common nickname for the Disney character among Chinese viewers.

Inherent in the question of transmission is the question of ownership - transmission must come from someone, and travel to an audience of someone else. Does the tale belong to anyone who hears or tells it, or do the “original” tellers have a greater claim? Does ownership matter in folklore? In his essay “Yours, Mine, or Ours? Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the Ownership of Fairy Tales,” Donald Haase answers the question of ownership of folktales by claiming that they belong to you, the individual (71). “We claim fairy tales in every individual act of telling and reading (72),” and, presumably, can claim other folktales in an individual act of viewing. Such ownership liberates consumers, and allows for a necessary multiplicity of voices and interpretations.

But this view of ownership perhaps does not give enough credit to the influence of wider culture on the individual. Certainly, it would have a more difficult reception in China, where a long history of literary criticism has placed an emphasis on literature as the distinct product of its author’s intent, moral character, and historical background. This tradition stands firmly opposed to concepts such as the “death of the author.” As a result, paradigms such as the reader-response theory that informs Haase’s perspective have not enjoyed as much popularity in China as they have in the West (and particularly the U.S.). Disney and the majority of the American audience are, of course, not consciously poststructuralist, but the focus on the individual reader or viewer’s reactions (in the U.S.) versus the author’s context (in China) are indicative of a general divide in thought between the two cultures.

Ownership may be both individually and collectively expressed and contested, as “The Ballad of Mulan” may be both individually interpreted (as with Kingston) and collectively
understood (as with many domestic film adaptations) as contributing to “what it means to be a Chinese woman.” To change ownership in the telling and hearing is inevitable in the transmission of folklore. But concepts of ownership and reactions to the methods of transmission are also linked, in cases like Mulan, to concepts of group identity. Kingston claimed Mulan as part of forming a Chinese and feminist identity. Disney claimed Mulan as part of an appeal to, in the view of some Chinese scholars, individualistic “Western Feminism” and as an appropriation of Chinese culture. Hua Mulan claimed the story as a way to valorize national identity and to strike back against Disney’s appropriation. The ultimate reach and success of Mulan or Hua Mulan as a vehicle for transmitting the tale (and as a film) speaks to the power of the creators and their audience. The fact that Mulan was seen by many Chinese people as inaccurately representing the tale and its values did not impede its transmission to the American public or the world at large. Disney has been the primary source through which Americans and others outside the Sinosphere have learned the tale, making their first (and often only) exposure to the story of Mulan a retelling with an American bent. Hua Mulan, in spite of benefitting from international financing, was only genuinely successful in re-transmitting its values to an audience that was already aware of them. Outside of the Sinosphere, the film went largely unnoticed. For cultural dialogue to truly occur, and in order to understand the impact and implications of folktales in a globalized era, folklorists cannot neglect films and other large-scale cultural products as a form of transmission. What a film transmits, and how, and to whom, can show the dialogue, appropriation, and resistance that enable or impede understanding between cultures.
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