

## **A BRIEF ANALYSIS ON THE DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE AESTHETICS IN EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURE--TAKE MULAN AS AN EXAMPLE**

**Huang Ruixi**

Chengdu Institute Sichuan International Studies University, Chengdu, 611844, China

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, with the trend of economic globalization and cultural integration, cultural communication has become the objective existence of human cultural life. Culture is the essence and soul of a nation, and as one of the cultural elements, artworks are the carrier of culture, reflecting the aesthetic ideology of a country. Chinese culture under traditional Chinese aesthetics is the carrier of Chinese image and plays an important role in showing cultural confidence. This paper starts from the definition and features of traditional Chinese aesthetics, and then analyses the characters in the film *Mulan* from western and eastern perspectives. Based on cultural differences, the interpretation of traditional Chinese aesthetics has different manifestations with several examples. Finally, the paper presents efficient strategies to make cross-cultural communication more effective and acceptable at home and abroad. Cultural output needs to consider the aesthetic concepts and values of the audience, and at the same time, it should also pay attention to the comprehensive interpretation of the beauty of traditional Chinese culture. The paper explains these strategies in a clear way, and it is believed that China's cultural output in cross-cultural communication will become more prosperous.

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**Keywords:** traditional Chinese aesthetics; cultural difference; cross-cultural communication

### **1. Introduction**

Cross-cultural communication is quite common in our daily life. People transmit knowledge, information, ideas, emotions and beliefs in certain ways, as well as all related social activities, which can be regarded as cross-cultural communication. The key to state-to-state relations lies in amity between the people. We should strengthen cultural communication between the eastern and western peoples so that they can not only appreciate each other's beauty, but also present the best image of their own countries. Therefore, the shaping of artworks is a main source to show the image of China and highlight the confidence of Chinese culture.

In cross-cultural communication, one should pay attention to the translation, respect the historical facts and present the national characteristics of China, so as to get rid of the old label of it in the modern society. This paper focuses on analysis of manifestations of traditional Chinese aesthetics and puts forward some suggestions on cross-cultural communication.

### **2. Manifestation and Background of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in the Film *Mulan***

“The word aesthetics comes from Greek. Strictly speaking, aesthetics, as the science of perception, is a subject exclusively in the West<sup>[1]</sup>.” The traditional Chinese aesthetics exists in the world aesthetics family with its unique system. The definition and feature of it will be introduced in the following part, and through its feature, the thesis will explore the manifestations of traditional aesthetics in the film *Mulan*.

### **2.1. The Definition and Features of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics**

As a matter of fact, there was no subject of aesthetics in ancient China. Aesthetics is a theoretical form generated after the differentiation of human knowledge in modern times, which is based on the western context. The international status of Chinese traditional aesthetics is controversial, and its cultural background is as follows: “It lasted more than two thousand years, from the early Greek philosopher Plato talked about beauty (καλλος), Aristotle talked about the poem (ποιησις), until 1750, German philosopher Baumgarten set up Aesthetica. After that, the rise of German classical aesthetics promoted the development of this subject. Therefore, in the eyes of some Western aestheticians, it is doubtful whether there is a department of aesthetics in China. From the generation and inheritance of discipline paradigm, their skepticism naturally has its internal reasons<sup>[1]</sup>.”

So is there aesthetics in China? What is the relationship between Chinese aesthetics and western aesthetics? Chinese aesthetics can be divided into traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern Chinese aesthetics. Modern scholars selectively integrated a considerable part of western theories with the spirit of Chinese traditional culture, thus forming the modern Chinese aesthetics with Chinese and Western characteristics. Although ancient China did not have the subject of aesthetics, it had relevant consciousness. Therefore, in the process of translating traditional Chinese aesthetics into Chinese, we distinguished it from the western aesthetics. This is also one of the essential differences with western aesthetics. Hegel summed up the essence of aesthetics that beauty is the perceptual manifestation of ideas, and he transformed beauty into a scientific and theoretical scientific system, while traditional Chinese aesthetics is a non-conceptual and non-scientific ideological system, following the concept of unity of heaven and man in the line of poetry. As is known to all, Chinese culture is deeply rooted in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and aesthetics is the product of them. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, as a landmark figure in the history of Chinese aesthetics, put forward that “Tao” is the source of all things, which means that everything in the world is a process from nothingness to possession, from simplicity to complexity. Therefore, we can know that harmony is based on opposition. This is the traditional Taoist thought of carefree and inaction consciousness, which means the conformity to nature. Confucius, the founder of traditional Confucianism believed that art must meet the requirements of morality, and it is necessary to emphasize the unity of beauty and goodness. What matters is the spiritual boundary of art and aesthetics to make people achieve benevolence; that was to say, it is critical to achieve the purpose of educating people's virtue. What's more, there are two main sources of Chinese classical artistic creation thoughts. One is the Taoist idea of "harmony between heaven and man", and the other is Confucius's aesthetic and creative thoughts of "harmony is the most valuable" and "harmony is the beauty". This is the so-called moderation in Chinese culture.

### **2.2. The Manifestation of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in the Film *Mulan***

Hua Mulan is the heroine in the film *Mulan*. She is a real heroine, famous for taking her father's place in the army to defeat the invading nations. The story of Hua Mulan spreads widely thanks to this folk song in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. It can be said that Hua Mulan is the representative of Chinese women and even of the women in the world. In this Disney film *Mulan* in 2020, three words: loyal, brave and true can be seen on Hua Mulan's sword, and in the end of the movie, “the devotion to family” is added. The first three qualities are

important in both the East and the West. Loyalty, in ancient China, was a symbol of Confucian culture, which referred to worrying about the country and the people, with a sense of anxiety. In the pre-Qin period, "loyalty" generally included three meanings. First, as a general social moral concept, it often had the meaning of sincerity, deference and so on, especially with the implication of doing one's best. In the Spring and Autumn Period, loyalty was a universal moral requirement for everyone. Second, the meaning of loyalty tended to be loyal to the emperor. Loyalty was regarded as an important virtue of ministers to the emperor. The concept of a minister's loyalty to the emperor can be interpreted in many ways. Generally the concept of loyalty to the emperor emphasized that the subordinate's loyalty to the emperor must be honest. Moreover, the emperor's subjects were required to be loyal to him, even at the cost of their own lives. In the film *Mulan*, Hua Mulan risked her life saving the emperor's life, and also saved the whole dynasty. This is the performance of loyalty to the emperor. Third, loyalty means loyalty to one's country. Loyalty is also often reflected in the moral quality of devoting one's life to the overall interests of the country. This concept has always been the dominant value in traditional Chinese society, reflecting the simple public rationality of ancient Chinese in the political and social fields. In the film, Hua Mulan was also loyal to the people, as the emperor was a good man in the film. He represented justice and peace and the interests of the public. As for the quality, bravery, it is also rooted in the hearts of Chinese people. It presents vividly in ancient Chinese fairy tales, such as Pan Gu, Nv Wa, and Yu. Chinese people are often considered to be reserved. In fact, the cultural differences lead to a completely different understanding of bravery. Chinese never like to express bravery directly, and never show bravery on their faces. Hua Mulan, as a woman, she showed that women were not inferior to men. As for the quality, true, has been early summed up in the essence of our ancestors' thought: "Confucius believed that if art was to meet the requirements of morality, it must emphasize the unity of beauty and kindness. <sup>[2]</sup>" Mencius, on the basis of inheriting Confucius' theory, proposed the combination of "faith" with "beauty" and "goodness", which served as a basis for the unity of truth, goodness and beauty. Compared with western values, the quality of devotion to family is a more important value norm in traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism thinks the devotion to family is the root of benevolence, which is thought to be based on the deep love between offspring and parents. However, since the Han dynasty, to a certain degree, the society has produced an extreme interpretation of devotion to family. Anyway, it is an important part of traditional Chinese virtues, such as the story of Hua Mulan.

### **3. Analysis on the Manifestations and Causes of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in Eastern and Western Culture**

There always exist different manifestations of traditional Chinese aesthetics because of cultural differences in eastern and western culture. Specific analysis of the characters will be discussed in the film *Mulan* from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics in the following part.

#### **3.1. Characters from Western Perspective in *Mulan***

Compared with another Chinese versions related to the story of Hua Mulan, this Disney version (2020) *Mulan* adds the role of the witch, which conforms to the western context. In this film, the witch represents women who are not valued by the society. Apparently, she is the antagonist opposed to Hua Mulan. Disney directors add such western elements in order to conform to the values of western audiences to a certain degree, so that they can have a better viewing experience and improve their understanding of the film. In the values of Western countries, they pay more attention to the realization of their own value, such as feminism and individual heroism, which are well interpreted in this film:

“Hofstede (1983) proposed a national cultural dimension model to explain the influence of different cultural backgrounds on employee values, namely, individualism/collectivism uncertainty avoidance power distance and masculinity/femininity. He pointed out that all differences in cultural values can be traced back to one or more of these basic dimensions. In Hofstede's four-dimensional cultural theory, individualism/collectivism refers to how individuals view their relationship with others and society. In the index of this dimension, Americans stand in sharp contrast to groups with Chinese cultural backgrounds. In domestic films, Hua Mulan always follows the principle of national interest first, and even sacrifices her own interests, even her life, for national interest. The United States emphasizes individual freedom and individual achievement. Disney's Mulan single-handedly saves the entire nation, embodying American individualism. The difference of mainstream values between China and America leads to the difference of Mulan's image<sup>[3]</sup>.”

### 3.2. Characters from Eastern Perspective in Mulan

There are a lot of Chinese cultural elements in the film. “Chi” was a mysterious power possessed by Mulan, which was not directly explained in the film. In the eyes of the western audiences, this may be a kind of superpower, and it fell on Mulan by chance, who had no noble status or mysterious background.

However, from the perspective of Chinese, it can be associated with the Chinese Chigong culture. According to the research of archeologists, Chinese Chigong has a history of at least 5,000 years. “Laozi put forward three elements of Chigong in Tao Te Ching, namely, regulating the heart, regulating the breath and regulating the body, which are the theoretical basis of Chinese Chigong<sup>[4]</sup>.” Taoist immortal Peng Zu is said to have lived 800 years because of Chigong practice. Chigong culture has a profound influence on traditional Chinese culture. In modern Chinese movies and TV plays, Chinese immortals or people practicing martial arts have deep attains in Chigong. Therefore, Chigong is not a so-called mysterious power, but a method of keeping fit and prolonging life in traditional Chinese culture. As time goes by, it has gradually become a unique Chigong culture in ancient China. Hua Mulan is not an Oriental woman with mysterious powers, which is how Oriental culture interprets her.

### 3.3. The Cultural Differences Leading to Character Differences

Mulan is a western film that shows Chinese culture and interprets Eastern culture from a Western perspective. Therefore, something different from traditional Eastern culture will be produced in the process of character shaping. Different causes will be discussed in the following part.

#### 3.3.1. Regional Cultural Differences

Differences in geographical environment create different cultures. As a Chinese saying goes, a side water and soil raises a side people. China's traditional economy is a typical self-sufficient natural economy. People are more modest and conservative. Because they can live their whole lives on one piece of land, their culture is introverted. In addition, the ancient Chinese civilization originated from the river basin and belonged to agricultural civilization, which made the Oriental people pay attention to ethics, seek harmony and stability, and take the attitude ---harmony is the most valuable, tolerance is the highest--- as the principle of life.

Western Ancient Greek civilization, originated from the coast of the Aegean Sea, belongs to Marine civilization, and European farming is far from as important as Chinese farming in ancient society, Europeans like to explore outward and their culture is more extroverted. In addition, western countries have entered the era of industrial economy very early after the Industrial Revolution, and the industrial civilization has endowed westerners with strong fighting spirit and legal consciousness to safeguard their own interests, taking independence, freedom and equality as the principles of life.

Due to the closed continental geographical environment, Chinese people are good at summing up the experience and lessons of the predecessors, and like to take history as a mirror; however, the Chinese have weak spatial awareness. This kind of introverted thinking leads to Chinese people's character of seeking stability and quietness, lack of curiosity about new things and lack of interest in unknown things. Most western countries are in the open Marine geographical environment, so that the industry and commerce, as well as the navigation industry have developed since the ancient Greece paid attention to the study of natural objects. At the same time, however, the mountain wind, tsunami and turbulence in the Marine environment also constitute the personality of western nations that attach importance to space expansion and conquest by force.

### **3.3.2. Historical Differences**

From the point of view of history, China has a long history and experienced cultural changes. It has different forms of brilliant and rich culture in various periods. Chinese culture values experience while western culture values rationality. There is no difference between western and Chinese primitive societies, with small population, low level of productivity, and the whole society were controlled by tradition and the parents. However, with the improvement of the level of productivity, the surplus of products, the polarization of the rich and the poor and private ownership, the relationship between common distribution and common labor was destroyed and replaced by class society. The two societies became different. The forms of governance in slave countries varied throughout the world. The slave countries of the East practiced monarchy, all state power was in the form of hereditary monarch. Athens in the West practiced direct democracy, in which civil servants were elected and voted by the "People's Assembly", which was mainly attended by slave owners and freemen. In Ancient Rome and Sparta, the aristocracy, the Senate (Ancient Rome) and the Council of elders (Sparta) held important powers. Eastern civilization is more about the suppression of human beings, while Western civilization is more about the development of human rights.

### **3.3.3. Ideological Differences**

As mentioned above, Chinese traditional culture is based on Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Western culture is mainly based on ancient Greek civilization and ancient Roman legal civilization. In terms of the way of thinking, Chinese people like to think from a higher position in life, jump out of the reality, pay attention to their thoughts on life, and have a deep thinking about the relationship between people, human and nature as well as human spirit and body. Westerners tend to focus on logical or rational thinking. Chinese people have abstract or perceptual thinking, while westerners pay more attention to the material world to explore and verify the origin of the problem.

When starting from the moral values, the West emphasizes the individual standard, while the Chinese advocate the group standard. The difference of moral values between China and the West makes their ethical systems and moral norms have different characteristics: western values contract, while Chinese values human ethics; the West values rationality, while the East values the connection between people.

## **4. Cross-cultural Communication Based on Cultural Differences**

Today, with the continuous cultural globalization, cross-cultural communication based on cultural differences is particularly important. Combined with the film *Mulan*, some suggestions will be provided as follows.

### **4.1. Presentation of Cross-cultural Communication Based on Cultural Differences in the Film *Mulan***

How to spread Chinese contemporary literary works abroad and how to reduce the communication barriers and achieve the expected communication effect in the process of going abroad has always been the main research

issue of the Chinese scholars. Generally speaking, translation is the key factor affecting the cross-cultural communication of literary works.

The film has carried on special translation strategies to many proper nouns based on the Oriental cultural context, such as “judgment”, and “chancellor”. Since there is no corresponding word for these proper nouns based on Oriental culture, it is handled in this way. As mentioned above, the word “witch” is also an example. It can be said that the substitution is a way of cross-cultural communication, so that the audience can better understand the works of art. Huge differences in Chinese and English are based on a completely different culture context, so in the process of translation, the meaning itself cannot be completely translated, and the degree of cultural transmission is limited. Therefore, it’s necessary to keep cultural exchanges and deepen the understanding of Chinese traditional culture around the world. Only in this way, it is likely to shrink culture dissemination of misunderstanding, and the essence of traditional Chinese culture can be easier to understand.

In addition, the makeup and architecture are also highlights of the film. They have unique characteristics and represent the traditional Chinese aesthetics. The makeup on Mulan's face in the film was popular in the Southern and Northern dynasties, even in the Tang Dynasty, and it also can be seen in modern times on the makeup of Japanese geisha influenced by the Tang Dynasty of China. As for the architecture, the film opens with Hua Mulan's family living in an “earthen building” in Fujian province, a defensive building built by The Hakka people after they moved from the north to the southeast coast during the Ming Dynasty.

#### **4.2. Suggestions on Cross-cultural Communication**

Firstly, be authentic. Rigorous historical research should be paid attention to in the process of cross-cultural communication. To a large extent, the film Mulan actively disseminates traditional Chinese culture and shows the spirit of Chinese culture, but on the other hand, it ignores some historical details. For example, although there are controversies in history about which dynasty Mulan belonged to, it is generally believed that she was from the Northern Dynasty and lived in the north. The “earthen building” in Fujian province that appeared at the beginning of the film actually is in the south, and the earliest “earthen building” is only 700 years old, so the story of Hua Mulan is earlier than the appearance of it. Blindly pursuing individuality will lead to the loss of authenticity and violate the original intention of cultural communication.

Secondly, be beautiful. On the makeup issue, although the director has been in line with the historical facts and the aesthetic details on the ancient portraits, it gives people a feeling of too much pursuit of characteristics and the ignorance of beauty. In this regard, we can compare it with China's domestic treatment of this kind of makeup in the TV series *The Longest Day in Chang'an* and the show *The Nation's Treasure*, where the makeup is softer, and gives people the appreciation of beauty. Maybe this kind of treatment in *Mulan* is to conform to the plot setting, but in terms of cultural output, it really ignores the sensory experience. To some extent, they even cater to western people's imagination of traditional China, ignoring the real aesthetics of Chinese culture.

Thirdly, be unique. In fact, we can retain Chinese characteristics to some extent, which is a kind of respect for Chinese culture and a way to enhance cultural confidence. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary, the most authoritative dictionary in the world, contains a lot of unique Chinese-style expression, such as “jiaozi”, “add oil” and “hongbao” and so on.

Last but not least, be diversified. It is necessary to break some of the western stereotypes about China. We can see them from *The Last Emperor* and *The Good Earth*, which are filmed by foreigners. The backgrounds in these films are all in contemporary and modern China. Therefore, it is easy to lead to the one-sided interpretation of

Chinese culture. Modern Chinese culture is based on thousands of years of culture, not just a short period of time. In my opinion, we should make more films about different periods of Chinese history, and Mulan is a good example.

### 5. Conclusion

In today's world, the competition in comprehensive national strength is becoming more and more intense, and the status and role of culture are becoming increasingly prominent. Therefore, China needs to show its image to the world in a more comprehensive way. This paper firstly presents the definition and features of traditional Chinese aesthetics, and then explores the manifestations of it in Chinese and western culture, trying to show the origin of Chinese culture. To find out that why culture deviation exists in cross-cultural communication, the paper analyzes the causes of cultural differences from three aspects. Finally, the paper discusses the presentation of cross-cultural communication combined with the film Mulan and puts forward some suggestions on cross-cultural communication.

Cultural differences certainly exist, but we can make efforts to promote cross-cultural communications, achieve cultural diversity, enhance mutual understanding of various ethnic cultures, and enhance the friendship between ethnic groups. In the process of cultural output, for one thing, the paper tries to show the importance of cross-cultural communication. For another, by deep study of Chinese elements in the film Mulan, it tries to arouse public attention to know the authentic Chinese cultural connotation. Through some classic examples of arts of traditional Chinese aesthetics, this article has concluded and listed some useful strategies and practical methods in cross-cultural communication.

To sum up, we should pay more attention to its accuracy, aesthetic sensibility and diversity in cross-cultural communication. It is believed that Chinese culture will be more and more globalized and recognized by all countries in the world.

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