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Mulan Trade-marked:

Representation, Globalization and the Unforbidden City

In the United States, the current social acceptability of Chinese Americans hides a reality unknown to almost all Americans except those of Chinese origin. From the middle of the nineteenth-century onwards, newspaper editorialists, politicians, educators, and “men of the cloth” campaigned not only to stop Chinese immigration but also to deny Chinese people the right to American citizenship. This ideological campaign was successful, and in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed the House of Representatives with 201 yeas and 37 nays, making it virtually impossible for new Chinese immigrants to enter the country and it was not until 1943 that the act finally repealed. By then Japanese Americans had been interned in concentration camps, and furnished the necessary Oriental Other. Moreover, China was now a World War Two ally of the USA and it was reinforced the new anti-Japanese, pro-Chinese discourse to make the gesture of repeal; the new congressional act allowed the naturalization of Chinese, and permitted a quota of 105 immigrants per year.¹

Given white America’s history of distrust and even hatred of the Chinese, why at the end of the twentieth-century did Disney-America choose to make their “Chinese cartoon,” *Mulan*.² Is it simply as Byrne and McQuillan claim that Disney in making this film wished primarily to please the Chinese authorities so as to tap into the vast potential of a market whose doors are now wide open via the WTO?³ And why did Disney choose this story of a dutiful daughter who secretly takes her father’s place in the imperial Chinese army so as to defend the state from invading foreigners? After all the story, until Disney had nuanced it, was not a typical Disney historico-mythic love story. The original Chinese tale, or ballad, which first circulated

around fifteen hundred years ago and was retold in many forms (lyric, theatrical and narrative) over the subsequent centuries, stressed the lack of importance of gender as long as the task in hand was adequately done:

For twelve years the warriors had campaigned together
None suspected that Mulan was a woman
The male rabbit jumps, and the female blinks
When they run side by side
How can you tell which is which? ⁴

But Disney's redeployed and recuperated Mulan, easily assimilated into a tradition that venerates Joan of Arc, not only stands for semi-liberated woman, but also appeals to late twentieth-century American "multiculturalism". And yet, Disney's admittance of Chineseness to its cartoon stable forgets the long struggle of Chinese and Japanese Americans for recognition of their ill treatment at the hands of the state and American society. That struggle started in 1960s and 1970s anti-Vietnam war protests and led to the formation of an Asian American consciousness. The movement also led directly to the creation of university departments of Asian American studies established initially by writers and activists such as Shawn Wong and Lawson Inada and now largely, and sadly, "professionalized" and colonized by "qualified" academics. The Disney representation of Americanized Chineseness, then, elides the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century legal exclusion of Chinese from immigration and American citizenship; the internment camps in which Japanese immigrants and American citizens of Japanese origin were indiscriminately imprisoned in the deserts of the American West during the Second World War after Pearl Harbour; and more recently the racism of the 1980s when the anger of US workers and their failing automobile industry was vented on unsuspecting Asian Americans. Japan was held responsible for the misfortunes of the American motor industry because it produced better, cheaper cars, and so Japanese people singled out for revenge, but Chinese and Korean Americans were

also victimized since “they all look the same”. But Mulan is not only the acknowledgment of Asian America’s recent acceptability, she is also the personification of a certain ideological model of postmodern femininity: the feisty (I’m in the army now) American woman. Moreover, she is an anti-totalitarian freedom fighter, the oppressors being “the Huns” in the film as in the tie-in electronic video game: “Fight for freedom in the Macromedia® Shockwave™ Battle the Huns game”.⁵

In a feminist reading that valorizes some aspects of the Disney production, Christina Lee finds that “Mulan defies the image of the passive oriental female” and that the film “resists being read as simply a banal piece of Disney fluff.” However, this discourse of emancipation has its limits, and it is not Mulan’s prowess as a woman warrior which is valorized since “Mulan’s social visibility in the army can only be attained when she is defined as *being* male, not being *like* a male.”⁶ And after the fighting is over and the imperial order reaffirmed:

Her 'true' (gender) identity must be publicly reinstated to re-establish social (gender) order. Mulan resuming her role as the filial daughter and surrendering her 'warrior' aspect, and her physical metamorphosis into a female again; but more importantly her affectionate relationship to Li Shang, which explicitly verifies her heteronormativity, achieve this.

Or as Byrne and McQuillan more succinctly resume Mulan’s return to the parental home and marriage to the main male character, “the reimposition of the patriarchal order at the end of the Disney film serves to undo the liberating potential of its central female character.”⁷

The concerns of the authors cited so far are with contemporary representations and political meanings, the reproduction of gender stereotypes, Disney’s pandering, or being “in hock to”, the Chinese authorities and so on. The film as a representation of a specific historical moment, however, seems not to be a

major concern to these authors. And yet, the representation of history in this film once more reinscribes Orientalist and Social Sciences Area Studies practices of conflating all the “pre-modern” into a monolithic moment of antiquity. In other words, in *Mulan* pre-modern China becomes a seamless static non-historical entity. For instance, the official Disney English language web page invited us to “Explore ancient China -- Mulan's world -- with these links.”⁸

As Ziauddin Sardar has noted, the problem with the anti-Orientalist discourse inscribed and inspired by Saïd is that the pre-modern, the “traditional” tends to be denigrated as reactionary and as having nothing to contribute to the progressive modern “Orient.”⁹ By focussing wholly on the contemporary moment of the Disney production we lose sight of interesting questions of Chinese history. For example, we could try to think of the sense of *Mulan* at the time the original poem and legend first circulated, and the factors contributing to the story’s popularity in China itself. But we might also investigate progressive representations of woman, and critiques of womanhood, in modern Chinese cultural and political discourses. The twentieth-century for Chinese woman is the story of a tantalizing promise of emancipation, a promise, however, prized out of woman’s hands and manipulated by a dominant male discourse, a promise subsumed under a discourse of a people’s revolution.

In terms of traditional representations of “the Chinese” by Western cultural producers and popular culture, the film is relatively free of clichéd physical characteristics associated with Chineseness (the buckteeth, the myopic slanty eyes) that can be found in earlier representations. But at the level of ideological representation of the Chinese, what is reinforced is a twentieth-century neo-Confucian revival of the virtues of imperial and family order which panders to China’s turn-of-the century Marxism-less nationalist imaginary; an imaginary which takes its emotive force from the reality of enormous social and economic problems

(rural poverty, urban unemployment, organized crime) and which now harks back to a moment of Confucian stability (long since reinvented in Singapore) when the family was all and men and women knew their place. This representation ignores historical realities. Confucian values have never gone unchallenged, even at the time of Confucius, two thousand four hundred years ago. In modern times anarchist and feminist ideas have proliferated even if severely suppressed. In a sense then the intersection of Chinese official ideology and Western (Disney) desires and designs on China pointed to by Byrne and McQuillan are real enough.

However, while accepting that Byrne and McQuillan may be partly right in asserting that Disney's "intentions" were to primarily please and target China, the fact remains that *Mulan* is a film made in an American historical context of a tradition of recuperation and reinvention of Chineseness. The film's "Confucianism" also appeals to American perceptions of the Chinese as disciplined and docile. Moreover, there has always been a place for a certain "Chineseness" in the American cultural imaginary. As Chinese-American author and activist Frank Chin, writing in the 1980s, somewhat acerbically noted:

Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, Pearl Buck, Shangri-la of the Thirties has become Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Wang in the Eighties, providing whites with an escape from the immediate and pressing terror of hard times, of empty gas tanks and payments to make. Whites have been using the Chinese as the metaphorical out for all their perversions and debilitating insecurities since the thirteenth century. The popular stereotype of the Chinese, white religion, Hollywood and TV is a sickening pastiche of white perversions and socially unacceptable fantasies made speakable by calling them Chinese.¹⁰

And now there is the Disney *Mulan* which also foregoes any Chinese or Chinese American mediation. It may be stating the obvious, but there are no Chinese actors or faces involved in this production, the nature of cartoon and animation facilitating the total control of the visual representation of Chineseness, just as in the recent past Hollywood sculpted our image of Chineseness by employing whites to play the roles of Chinese villains in its China movies.

On the economic level, the marketing by Disney and others of tie-in products in America and elsewhere in the non-Chinese world has been extensive. For instance, Internet fancy dress costumes suppliers First Fantasies include alongside Geisha girl and other "Oriental" outfits for adults, costumes for children furnished by their "children-owned" sub-division Costume Cuzzins. The costumes available include the "Hua Mulantm Costume (Kimono, Waist Sash & Fan! \$26.75; Mulan Wig \$10.00)".¹¹ Another e-commerce web site, Hua Mulan: The *Joan of Arc of China* Woman Warrior, offers "a more authentic [than Disney] Chinese-Styled picture on a T-Shirt to add to the celebration of women".¹²

It would seem then that even if this Disney product was "meant for" China it has nevertheless been recuperated back into mainstream American popular Orientalist culture. Hua Mulan has become the stereotype for little Western girls dressing up Chinese. The Chinese in question, however, is not Mulan the warrior but Mulan in a "kimono". The little girls do not dress up as rebellious Chinese girls, but as a reinscribed cliché of kimono-clad Oriental woman.

Pace Byrne and McQuillan's impression, the film itself has had a great deal of box office success in America and the non-Chinese world. By October 2000, the film, released in 1998, had achieved seventy-ninth place in the listings of the best-selling films ever, worldwide, having grossed \$120 million dollars in the United States and US\$183 million elsewhere in the world.¹³

Again if the film is intended simply to please the Chinese, what is meant to appeal in terms of the musical soundtrack? The "Chineseness" of the music is superficial, intended it seems to give a "Chinese flavour" and no more, since despite the occasional Chinese fourths and the predictable, although occasional, use of percussion, the music hardly departs from the usual pop operetta style of Disney film music. The film soundtrack regurgitates tried and tested Hollywood, and

conforms to the Western imaginary's notion of Chinese music. A web site dedicated to reviewing film soundtracks says this of the composer Jerry Goldsmith's and librettist Mathew Wilder's efforts:

The use of percussion and woodwinds in the songs are vital in portraying the Chinese setting. The themes themselves sound like typical Disney animated themes (although a few of the darker variety sound like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*). "Reflection" is almost a mirror of the hero's song in *Hercules*, but is performed with better texture and sincerity here. The pop version of this song at the end is almost identical to this original, but with the usual electronically boosted base and chimes.... Not often do the Disney albums have sparkling, fully orchestral versions of the songs, but Goldsmith works wonders with Wilder's songs for *Mulan*. Even if the songs are only adequate (or average), Goldsmith pours on the symphonic power, creative percussion, and electronic accompaniment. His string-dominated version of "Reflections" has the same grand sensation of the opening titles to *Star Trek: First Contact*. With the battle songs, trademark Goldsmith brass and timpani fanfares shake the floors as they did in the battle sequences for *First Knight*.¹⁴

Disney, then "has done" China, just as it did the Arab world. In fact, the film merely reinscribes Hollywood's imagined Chineseness, but in the multicultural and geopolitical contexts of the late twentieth-century.

Beyond the question of Disney's "intentions", of whether or not the film is meant to please the authorities in China, it cannot be denied that the film has had an impact there. This exceedingly well-known story has now been "repackaged" and copycat "tie-in" products have been mass produced. For instance a cartoon book *Zhonghua minzu nü yingxiong-Hua Mulan* (Woman Hero of the Chinese Nation-Hua Mulan) was published by the China Film Publishing House shortly after the film was released.¹⁵ The same garish colours are employed in the illustrations and Mulan's Disney "Chinese features" are reproduced. Hollywood's patented inventions and embellishments, the mini-dragon Mushu, and the lucky cricket Cri-Kee, are not imitated, however, and the supernatural plays no part in the Chinese comic book version of the story.

In addition to rushing out new versions of the old story in light of the Disney film, there have also been attempts to exploit the tourism and publicity potential of Mulan's new-found celebrity. Yucheng County, the reputed birthplace of the legendary Mulan has posted an English-language web page on the Internet in the hope of attracting tourists and investors:

The place where Mulan joined the army in ancient time now has become a prosperous place....Yucheng people welcome all friends to come to Yucheng for sightseeing and investment to go forward to the new century together.¹⁶

Such initiatives accord perfectly with the Chinese government's goals for what it calls "cultural commercialization" on the eve of China's entry into the World Trade Organization. While the notion of "commercialization of literature", taking writer and artists off the state payroll and leaving them to fend for themselves on the market, has been current for some time, the phrase "cultural commercialization" was first defined in the tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2001-05), approved in November 2000 at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The focus has been placed on "culture-related products for the domestic and overseas markets".¹⁷ The precise nature of the culture to be commercialized is not made clear, except that it concerns the broad categories of art, film, and music. But Lin Jianfa, editor of a literary journal, is quoted as saying, that "at a time when China's entry into the World Trade Organization is fast approaching, it's all the more important for the country to quicken the commercialization process in the cultural sector."¹⁸ The domestic leisure and tourism sectors of the economy are most certainly the most susceptible areas for the implementation of this policy -- already during the 1990s dozens of theme parks were built in China -- but now the export market is also targeted. Chen Sihe, an academic from Shanghai's Fudan University in Shanghai, fearing that cultural products from overseas would "pour into the Chinese market"

encouraged China's organs to "make greater efforts to make full use of our own rich cultural resources and promote the commercialization of cultural products in order to meet the requirements of a competitive international market".¹⁹

The idea of marketing China's cultural heritage not new. I recall interviewing in 1985 a professor at a leading Chinese university who wished to manufacture and market replicas of an original Chinese compass; the compass is one of China "four great inventions" (the others being paper, movable print, and gunpowder). But what will the commercialization of culture envisaged by the five-year plan resemble? In order for Chinese culture to be commodified will it have to be remade so as to be more easily mapped onto the category "Chinese culture" as it exists in the Western imaginary? Will China's and the world's consumers be treated to countless Disney-like filmic representations of Chinese traditional tales? Will imitations of western Orientalist Fu-Manchu-inspired board games fill the shelves of the World's toy stores; Chinese imitations of games such as the one marketed by a subsidiary of the American game and toy manufacturers Hasbro, "MB Jeux", as *Les mystères de Pékin : le jeu du détective chinois*. Truly representative of the power relations of the globalized economy, the aim of the game, which is manufactured in Waterford, Ireland is to discover "who has kidnapped the servant of Peking notable leaving behind a ransom note stained with soy sauce?"²⁰ Once again the cultural referent is to be found in the West's limited knowledge of Chineseness; the ubiquitous, but only in the West's Chinese western-nuanced restaurants, salty brown soy sauce.

Without wanting to fall into the trap of romancing the "authentic", will the traditional culture marketed by China itself be no more than a reproduction of Western popular Orientalist "kitsch"? For many years the Chinese authorities have condemned contemporary writers, artists and filmmakers, for indulging in hybrid cultural practices, for lacking Chineseness. Now it seems that to sell China's

heritage for money is good “socialist market economics”, while to endeavour to China’s language and culture on to new regenerative paths remains unpatriotic heresy.²¹

Mass culture on the other hand and the quality of Chinese everyday life seems to be viewed in a different light, and Chinese academics and other custodians of Chinese culture have reason to be concerned at current trends. For while they devise ways of marketing Chinese culture at home and abroad, it is an altogether different cultural imaginary that the Chinese consumers wishes to assume for their own. If Mulan was a Disney package to please the Chinese, McDonalds did not have to take the trouble to invent a MacPekingduckburger in order to seduce the new Chinese consumer, and already dozens of McDonalds hamburger restaurants pepper the streets of Beijing. Recently the American coffee shop chain Starbucks opened up a new cafe inside one of the, formerly, sacred great halls of the Forbidden City in Beijing, the world’s largest imperial palace placed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 1987.²² During the nineteenth century the Western powers and Japan were able to sack China’s palaces and pillage the country’s treasures as they wished. China was helpless to stop them. One of the great themes of Chinese Communism was to rid the country of such humiliation. But where imperialism was pushed back, globalization is now making substantial inroads.²³

This article aimed to narrate the story of white (mis)representations of China and the endurance populist Orientalist discourse in Western media and entertainment, while its subsidiary concern was with the emulation and internalization of that discourse by Chinese themselves. Sadly, the more pressing question in Chinese urban culture today is not that of “*ersatz*” Chineseness, but of the full-blooded Americanization (now calling itself “globalization”) of everyday life.

While Chineseness for the American and European child is now a video called *Mulan*, for the urban middle-class Chinese family it is a hamburger and an American coffee consumed whilst strolling through the ruins of China's cultural heritage.

¹ For a full analysis of the anti-Chinese discourse during the exclusion campaign see chapter seven of my *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism and Hybridity in China and Its Others*, London: C. Hurst; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. See also Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999) 99-103 for more on twentieth-century American representations of the Chinese.

² *Mulan*. Walt Disney Pictures 1998. Voices of Eddie Murphy, Pat Morita. Directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft.

³ Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999) 163-165. Byrne and McQuillan see the Disney film as a sop to the Chinese authorities, as a means of gaining a foothold in China, an imbrication of the interests of a Chinese nationalist expansionist discourse of reunification (Taiwan) and of Disney's desire to "open up" China to its products.

⁴ My translation of the last lines of *Mulan* (*The Ballad of Mulan*). The Chinese text is consultable on-line at <http://members.easyspace.com/pcman/mulanpoem.html>

⁵ <http://disney.go.com/worldsofdisney/mulan/html/> [accessed 3 November 2000]. But let us not forget that lurking behind every battle is a threat to the real world's safety (in *Aladdin* it's Iraq). So, today the Huns, tomorrow the Russians?

⁶ Christina Lee, "Mulan: Woman Warrior as Embodied Ambiguity" in *Intersections*. Issue No.2 <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue2/Mulanreview.html>. Consulted 10 October 2000.

⁷ Byrne and McQuillan 165.

⁸ <http://disney.go.com/worldsofdisney/mulan/html/> [accessed 3 November 2000]

⁹ Sardar, *Orientalism* 74-75. Even the otherwise enlightened grand "new historian" Fernand Braudel fell foul of the trap of thinking of pre-modern China as "immobile", or static; see his *Grammaire des civilisations* (Paris: Champs-Flammarion, 1993).

¹⁰ Frank Chin, "The Most Popular Book in China" in *Quilt* 4 (1984); reproduced in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* (Oxford & New York: 1999), 27-28.

¹¹ <http://store.firstfantasies2.com/MM046.ASP?pageno=65&aProds=RU%2D11118,RU%2D11119> consulted 2 November 2000. As is often the case, the Japanese 'kimono' is used to describe a Chinese costume. It is also to be noted that Hua Mulan, a Chinese historical and legendary personage now appears to be "trademarked". Further, raising the question "Who's exploiting whom," is the web site description of this Internet enterprise: "Costume Cuzzins is owned and operated by 6 very resourceful young children all cousins up to age 12! The two oldest children 9 & 12 are already familiar with the "business world" due to their participation in the entertainment industry and working in an "adult" world.... The 4 younger cousins are very instrumental in "product" selection (who better to select children's options for dress-up, play & costumes than children!), and assisted by their Mommy & Helpers, fulfill order processing & shipping concerns."

¹² <http://welcome-to-usa.com/mo/mulan/index.htm> [accessed 6 Nov 2000].

¹³ <http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/Top10ever.html> [accessed 29 October 2000] IN comparison, *Aladdin*, released in 1992, ranked nineteenth in this list of box office receipts, having grossed \$217million in the US and \$285 million in the rest of the world. These figures do not include video sale receipts and profits from tie-in products.

¹⁴ <http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/mulan.html> [accessed 3 November 2000].

¹⁵ Beijing: Zhonghua dianying chubanshe, 1998.

¹⁶ <http://sq.henanews.org.cn/english/sqgedi/yucheng.htm> [accessed 11 June 2000]

¹⁷ *China Daily* 27 November 2000. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndydb/2000/11/d4-2cul.b27.html>

¹⁸ *China Daily* 27 November 2000.

¹⁹ *China Daily* 27 November 2000.

²⁰ “Qui a kidnappé le serviteur d’un notable pékinois et laissé une tache de soja sur la demande de rançon?” This board game manufactured by Milton and Bradley, Hasbro Corporation trading name, and conceived by Mary Danby seems to be no longer on sale in an English-language version.

²¹ On 4th November 2000, three poets Wei Manzeng, Jiang Nan, and Wang Changhuai were arrested for disobeying a police notice to exclude banned poets from a poetry festival. The banned poets were Yang Chunguang and Zhong Dao. Yang was arrested for participating in the 1989 Tiananmen movement. Zhong was an Internet-based poet who publishes poems critical of the political situation in China. *China News Digest* 16 November 2000.

²² *The China Daily* 25 November 2000. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndydb/2000/11/d1-4cafe.b25.html>

²³ I recently asked several of my twenty-odd year old students from Taiwan, where McDonald’s has been present since the late 1970s, whether they considered eating Big Macs as an American experience or a normal part of Taiwanese everyday life. They replied that it is just one of the things they had always done. In other words the practice has become naturalized. A twenty-two year old student from Beijing also told me that she considered milk products to be a customary part of the Chinese diet.