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Theoretical Analysis of Cultural Differences between China and the United States Based on Cultural Differences—A Case Study of the Chinese and American *Mulan* Films

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Abstract: **Background:** *Mulan*, an animated film produced by Disney and released in 1998, earned about \$120 million in the United States and about \$300 million worldwide, making it the second-highest-grossing family film of the year. **Purpose:** This paper compares the main characters of *Mulan*, General, and Father in the two versions of the film based on semiotics theory and cultural differences. It compares the Chinese and Western cultural elements. This helps us understand the different characteristics of the two versions of the film regarding cultural consciousness, cultural inclusion, and cultural exchange. This, in turn, helps us to tell Chinese stories and understand Chinese literature from different perspectives. **Methods:** This paper analyzes the cultural differences between *Hua Mulan* and China. This analysis is based on the four indexes of the power distance index, individualism, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance index, masculinity and femininity, self-indulgence, and restraint. **Results:** Based on the differences between these two versions of the film America is a low-power society with more individualism, so the image of *Mulan* gives more human rights and democracy. In contrast, China is a powerful society with more collectivism. **Conclusion:** Under the background of globalization, we should start from three aspects: 1)From the perspective of cultural discount theory, we should break down language barriers and avoid cultural discrimination. 2)According to Mason's theory of the hierarchy of needs, film and television works are both tools and valuable stories. The culture should be incorporated into the story so that the audience can gain cultural identity in subtlety 3)The communication modes/means should be diversified, and the Chinese stories should be better spread by integrating media. These Chinese stories should be spread in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: Literature, Semiotic, Theory of Cultural Differences, *Mulan* Semiotics Movies, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Mulan is a film adapted from *Mulan Ci*, which shows traditional Chinese culture, characters, and values. In 1998, *Mulan* was introduced by *Disney Company* in the United States, which once again caused concern in China and worldwide (Joshua, 2010). *Mulan* displays the exotic style of the East and the values and aesthetics of the West, causing far-reaching influence. This article analyzes the cultural differences reflected in *Mulan* from cultural differences perspective to explore the overseas communication mode of Chinese culture and provide a new perspective for disseminating Chinese film and television literature.

1.2 Research purpose

The export of Chinese animated films has been relatively low. The success of *Mulan* undoubtedly provides some experience and reference for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animated films (Kang et al., 2021). This paper deconstructs the film and the image of *Mulan* from the film semiotics perspective. It analyzes the difference between the two versions of *Mulan* from the perspective of Hoffstad's cultural differences. Exploring the successful operation mode of Chinese stories in the American context can help explore the possible overseas communication of Chinese culture and provide a new perspective for reading literary works.

1.3 Research objective

In this paper, the characters of *Hua Mulan* will be deconstructed from the perspective of the semiotics of the film, from the perspective of Disney's animated version of *Hua Mulan* and China's live-action film of 2020.

1.4 Research method

The comparative study method is used to analyze the two films. Based on the cultural difference theory, this paper analyzes and compares the cultural differences between Chinese and American films from four aspects. This paper analyzes and compares the cultural differences between the characters in the films, collects and analyzes the existing literature, summarizes the film, and analyzes the cultural phenomena. It communicates the underlying principles for analysis and explores the Chinese story overseas. It explores How to tell Chinese stories well. It provides a new paradigm for the dissemination of Chinese culture.

2. Structure the Film by the Semiotics theory

2.1 Overview of *Mulan's* Film

"Alas oh alas! Alas oh alas! *Mulan* is weaving cloth of topmost class. Listen, and you don't hear the spinning drone; ". The image of a classical lady is breathtaking. *Mulan* is widely regarded as a legendary woman, a brave and gentle warrior, intelligent, and virtuous lady. The legend originated from the collection of poems by Guo Maoqian in the Song Dynasty "*Mulan Ci*" and "*Mulan Poetry*". In 1998, *Disney* released *Mulan*, an animated film starring *Mulan*. This film grossed over \$300 million at the box office, making it one of *Disney's* most lucrative films. Through the perspective of American culture, this animation will reinterpret *Mulan's* legend. This brings *Mulan's* image to the eyes of Western audiences with a brand-new vitality.

In *Disney* movies in the United States, *Mulan* is a smart, ambitious girl. She aspires to be the pride of the flower family and contribute to the family. *Hua Mulan*, in parent's blind date arrangement, failed, suddenly encountered the northern Hun invasion, and the elderly father was sent to the battlefield. *Mulan* is afraid that her father will leave and steals her father's armor, pretending to be a man's clothing instead of her father going to war. To protect *Mulan*, the ancestors of the florists sent a kind-hearted mouse dragon to take care of her (Ren, 2007). *Mulan* experienced hard training and challenges in the army. *Hua Mulan's* daughter was discovered on the battlefield and decided to abandon her on a cold glacier and snowfield, leaving her to fight alone at the Hun border. Mu Xuong has always accompanied *Mulan's* side in difficult times. He helped the imperial army repel the invasion of the Huns and save the whole of China. Twelve years of military service were finally appreciated, disarmed, and returned to girlhood, which was a happy ending.

2.2 Character symbol

Film semiotics explore how movies communicate information through their unique symbolic system (He & Chen, 2015). This is an important part of film theory and involves semiotics. Film semiotics is regarded as an important part of contemporary art. It

promotes the development of art and greatly contributes to the art's progress. Roland Barthe deeply discusses "literature is a speech activity and a symbol system" from a semiotics perspective. He thinks the charm of literature comes from the unpredictable elements contained therein. In this movie, *Mulan* is portrayed as a person who is full of courage, challenges herself, and pursues personal growth. She is depicted in folklore as a strong woman, a legendary hero. The courage and glory of "Women are inferior to men", and tolerance and calmness after returning from a victory demonstrate her extraordinary courage and perseverance. Muscling is another important role of *Mulan*. It complements *Mulan*'s personality and subverts the image and connotation of a dragon in Chinese traditional culture. It becomes the guardian deity of *Mulan*. In Hua's ancestral hall, the slender lizard Mu Xuong has long been regarded as a homely object, but to prove its existence, it decided to become Hua's guardian deity on the expedition. The appearance of Mu Xuong promotes the story's development and adds a sense of humor to the film. This makes *Mulan*'s image more vivid, full, and diverse. When Mu Xuong and *Mulan* first meet, it uses the fire light to enlarge themselves, and the huge figure also lets *Mulan* be surprised. This action shows his deep anxiety and longing, his and *Mulan*'s situation, and his desire to pursue value differently.






2.3 Dress symbol

Mu Lan also incorporates many Chinese elements into its character design(Wu, 2019). The heroine retains a traditional Chinese girl's image like *Dan Fengyun* and *Gao Ponytail*. The design of animated costumes reflects the progress of human civilization. The traditional costume of the Chinese nation is a kind of wealth with creativity and artistry. It consists of fabric, style, color, pattern, and accessories. It is constrained by etiquette, forming a unique dress system. The costume design of the movie follows the Chinese tradition completely. *Mulan* and Li Xiang's works show their deep understanding of Han costumes. This costume shows the nation's fine traditions and the Han nationality's unique style. *Mulan* wore a tight dress with a tight waist and a loose hem. Li Xiang's military armor demonstrated the designer's deep understanding of the garment's shape and the details' essence. In addition, the characters in the film are vivid. *Mulan*'s filial piety and Li Xiang's loyalty show the essence of traditional Chinese culture.

2.4 Cultural symbol

Horachek points out that cultural symbols are historically evolved. They have unique aesthetic significance and form a stable system(Guo, 2006). In the film text, symbols represent the plot and development of the story. It does it by describing elements such as characters, scenes, movements, language, and music. The film showcases the essence of Chinese culture and presents it as a symbol of its unique Chinese style. The cultural symbols can be divided into practical and non-practical categories based on their social function. Practical symbols, such as pavilions featuring *auspicious clouds*, magnificent ancient Chinese palaces, and beacon towers, include towering mountains, endless rice paddies, and lush bamboo groves non-practical signs contain rolling hills.

Table 1. Deconstructing *Mulan's* Character Image from the Angle of Semiotics

Symbol	Representative person	Symbolic meaning	Illustration
Character symbol	Moussaur	The word "mu" stands for the <i>Mulan</i> army. It belongs to the army that Mulan joined. Xu Long, symbolizes his rank as a commanding officer. Mu Xu Long symbolizes bravery, intelligence, and kindness	 <p>Source:https://corporate.catchplay.com/?lan=en</p>
Dress Symbol	<i>Mulan's</i> Chinese clothing	<i>Mulan's</i> Chinese clothing, tight waist, skirt drag floor, and loose and comfortable hem represents the beauty and elegance of traditional Chinese culture. It symbolizes the status and identity of her family and shows her dignity and self-confidence.	 <p>Source:https://www.sohu.com/a/383026412_681460</p>
	Li Xiang's armor	Li Xiang's armor also represents the warrior spirit of traditional Chinese culture, namely loyalty, courage, and honor	 <p>Source:https://www.sohu.com/a/383026412_681460</p>
Cultural symbol	Practical symbol	A magnificent palace in ancient China	 <p>Source:http://game.people.com.cn/n/2015/1117/c40130-27825179-7.html</p>
	Non-practical symbol	Towering mountains	 <p>Source:https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20200416A0BE5200?pc</p>

3. Analysis of Cultural Differences between China and the United States

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is an effective theoretical framework for explaining the cultural differences between different countries. Annamoradnejad, et al. (2019) summarized the differences between cultures into six aspects. Since we are discussing the cultural differences between China and the United States, let us be clear about these five dimensions Scores and Ranking.

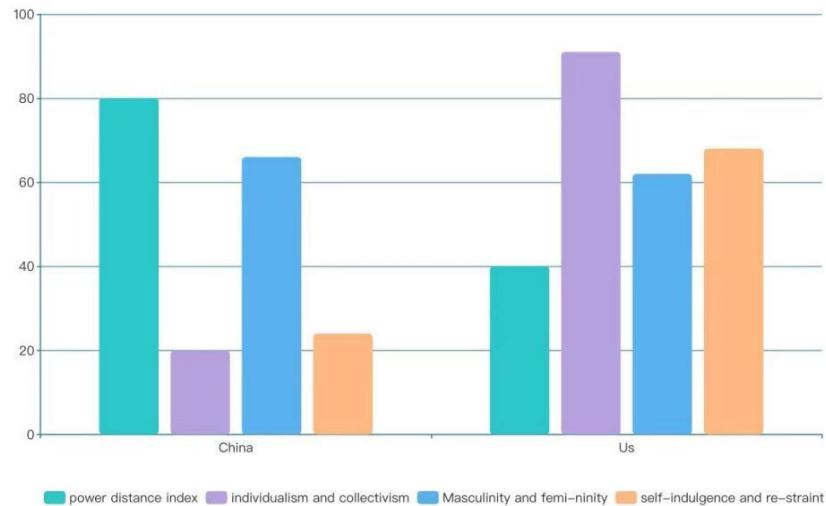


Chart 1 . Cultural Dimension Index Score and Ranking of China and the United States

3.1 Right distance index dimension dimension

The power gap reflects the acceptance of unfair power distribution in society affecting their lives(Hofstede & Geert, 2001). Because each country has unique views and understanding, they differ greatly in power. China is a country with a high-power distance. In ancient China, the people respected the system and obeyed the monarchy's authority, identified with the hierarchy, and were insensitive to unequal power distribution. In traditional Chinese culture, fathers are often regarded as authorities with unchallenged opinions and decisions[9]. Therefore, in the story of *Mulan*, *Mulan's* father-in-law's enlistment in the army can be seen as a challenge to the traditional power structure. However, due to the high distance of rights in Chinese culture. Moreover, in ancient Chinese culture, the authority of the army and leaders was often regarded as unquestionable. Their decisions and commands were usually followed by followers. Therefore, in the story of *Mulan*, *Mulan* decides to "go to the army on behalf of her father", obey orders, and actively carry out the tasks in the American version of *Mulan*. It can be seen that the film reflects a low power distance to a certain extent. First, the female characters in the film are respected and praised. *Mulan* is portrayed as an intelligent, courageous, and decisive woman whose abilities and contributions are recognized and respected. This cultural element can attract and inspire audiences, especially those more concerned with equality and freedom, and summarizes the differences into six important cultural values.

3.2 Individualism and collectivism

Individualism emphasizes the primacy of the individual. It emphasizes that the individual should be independent of others and that human relationships should be tolerant and equal. Collectivism emphasizes that everyone is responsible for abiding by the collective, national, and state rules(Wood, 1972). *Mulan* stands up for her country and demonstrates her national pride even in danger. Her "roar" expressed her loyalty to the country. She stood firm in defending the country's dignity. At this critical moment, *Mulan* still has a love for her country. *Mulan* is unconcerned about her personal feelings.

Individualism emphasizes the primacy of the individual, holds that the individual should be independent of others, and holds that human relationships should be tolerant and equal. Collectivism holds that everyone is responsible for abiding by the rules of the collective, national, and state. *Mulan*, in the film, stands up for her country and demonstrates her national pride even in the face of danger. Her "roar" was an expression of her loyalty to her country, and she stood firm in her defense of the country's dignity, even with hostile forces. At this critical moment, *Mulan* still has a love for her country. *Mulan* defied personal feelings and insisted on maintaining the peace and tranquility of the country. Let Wentai and Princess Rouran marry to make the relationship between the two countries harmonious and the world. *Mulan* resolutely chose the national interest in the current personal and national interests, which a strong collectivist spirit embodies. America is rich in culture and is committed to uplifting individual values and pursuing democracy and freedom. In American Editioning Ben's *Mulan* image, individualism comes first and personal interests and enjoyment are considered important goals. This concept encourages individuals to work hard, design themselves, and commit to personal values. Despite the challenges of the process, the United States has become a dynamic and growing nation(Fu, 2014).

3.3 Masculinity and Femininity

In this society, male characteristics, such as competitiveness and dogmatism, are often more pronounced. Whereas the female characteristics such as humility and caring for others, are often less/mis pronounced. There is a clear division of functions between men and women(Hofstede Et al., 2014) . As the MDI (Masculinity Dimension Index) increases, society becomes more masculine. On the contrary, it indicates a significant increase in the status of women in society.

First, the film presents the conflict between masculinity and femininity. In traditional Chinese culture, men are considered the noblest and most important, while women are often confined to family and trivial jobs. *Mulan's* holy image as a woman has enabled China to rejuvenate and become a leader of the country. Her actions are regarded as a symbol of masculinity, respected and appreciated by the emperor. Through this period of personal struggle, we can see that women's self-awareness has been fully recognized and stimulated their feminist spirit. Secondly, the film also presents a collaboration between men and women(Lin & Zhang, 2019). While posing as a man, *Mulan* established a good relationship with other male soldiers through cooperation and mutual help to achieve common goals. This process demonstrates the importance of cooperation and mutual support between the sexes in war and everyday life. In addition, the film presents challenges to gender stereotypes. When *Mulan* enlisted in the army, she met people who had stereotypes of women, such as those who thought women could not go to war. *Mulan* broke these stereotypes through her actions, proving that women can also be good soldiers.

3.4 Self-indulgence and Restraint

People's basic needs and desires to enjoy life are fully met in this society. *Mulan* faces a huge challenge in the movie that she must abide by her principles. Her inner desires to contribute to her family and country were constrained by family traditions. It prevented her from exercising her abilities within the family and society(Hofstede et al., 2010). However, she also faced limitations in her military life and had to obey military discipline, regulations, and military training and instructions. This conflict shows a struggle between desires and external expectations. The male and female characters in the film have different manifestations of self-indulgence and restraint. In traditional Chinese culture, men's roles are usually more unrestricted and independent. They are free to choose their careers and lifestyles. In contrast, women's roles face more constraints. These constraints require them to adhere to family traditions and social ethics. It is a regrettable fact that *Mulan* failed to win the battle. She might have suffered

a crushing defeat had it not been for Venita to protect her in time from the general's betrayal. She went to the Huns' army alone and saved Wanita. At the end of "*Mu Lan*", *Mulan* is not bound by the feudal hierarchy almost equally. The emperor appreciates her after her achievements. Instead of responding, *Mulan* expresses her gratitude with a warm hug.

Table 2. Four Dimensions Comparative Analysis of Cultural Difference Theory in *Mulan* of China and American

Index	China's <i>Mulan</i>	American's <i>Mulan</i>
Right distance index	The patriarchal society: in the story of <i>Mulan Flower</i> , <i>Mulan</i> decides to serve as her father's replacement.	In the American version of <i>Mulan</i> Film, it can be seen as a cultural product with a low power distance
Individualism and collectivism	The Chinese version of <i>Mulan</i> emphasizes collectivism, which holds that everyone has the responsibility to abide by the rules of the collective, national, and state	In the American version of <i>Mulan's</i> image, individualism comes first, and personal interests and enjoyment are considered important goals.
Masculinity and femininity	<i>Mulan's</i> saintly appearance as a woman enabled China to rejuvenate and become the leader of a nation whose actions are regarded as a symbol of masculinity and respected by the emperor.	The masculine and feminine nature of <i>Mulan</i> comes from the main character's image and behavior (running, climbing trees, and using weapons). The sensitivity and care she shows in her interactions with Musu-long and other army members helped her win their respect and support
Self-indulgence and restraint	In the Chinese version of <i>Mulan</i> , self-indulgence, and restraint are important themes. Through the experience of the protagonist <i>Mulan</i> , the film shows the importance of self-discipline and self-control and emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between self-indulgence and self-discipline.	In the American version of <i>Mulan</i> , the protagonist <i>Mulan</i> indulges herself differently from the Chinese version. Instead of cutting her hair short and wearing men's clothing like the Chinese version of <i>Mulan</i> , she showed more of her inner courage and strength. She indulges herself by showing off her athletic abilities, combat skills, self-confidence, and shows masculinity in these areas.

4. Analysis of the Traditional Chinese Culture Film and Television Communication Path in the Context of Cross-cultural

With the advancement of global economic integration and the spread of culture through a wide range of media, cultural exchanges across national boundaries have become the foundation of sustainable development. Under the framework of structuralism, the cultures of each region show a certain degree of interweaving and integration. The film is a widely spread and important medium worldwide. It promotes understanding and communication of cultures and combines elements of cultures to make the monster image more vivid and colorful(Lin & Gao., 2022).

4.1 Hollywood Production System and Means of Communication

Hollywood film production system originated from American multiculturalism(Fan 2014). Since the 1990s, professional directors and screenwriters began to select and adapt suitable themes worldwide. Universal Values is a film-making process worldwide. They draw inspiration from global cultures, select suitable subjects, and incorporate universal values into the production and promotion of films. Hollywood's global material

selection, production, and release patterns dominate the global film market. It conveys American cultural values and Western consciousness through the film, people's delusion, and longing. In addition, its innovation and concern for the civilian population have provided favorable conditions for cross-cultural and geographical dissemination(Yan, 2018).

4.2 Difficulties in Overseas Communication of Chinese Culture Cross-cultural awareness

4.2.1 cross-cultural cognitive Problem

Semiotic theory points out that cognition is a subjective feeling and a deep-thinking activity. In this activity, subjective thoughts and feelings are integrated into objective things, evaluated, and judged(Jiang, 2018). The ability to think is divided into comprehension and expression. It is easier to understand at a weaker level of cognition. When people are at a higher level of thinking, they are more willing to express themselves. Cognitive difference between the subject and object refers to the current level of cognition and the actual situation. People's subjective consciousness determines their expectations and receptiveness to the content of cultural communication. It is based on their understanding of the objectives, the readability of the text, and the understanding of others. Real communication is more effective when the recipient and the exporter understand the content they think they don't know and have a cognitive gap to fill. However, since Chinese culture is not yet familiar to the global public, such an exchange may not be feasible(Wang, 2020).

4.2.2 Distortion of Coding and Differentiation of Decoding System

Stuart Hall proposed the coding and decoding theory, emphasizing the value of information transmission. It is achieved by implicit coding rather than a simple linear propagation, which may not be fully understood by the receiver (Elwyn & Berlekamp, 1984). Fang suggested that the coding process can be divided into primary and secondary. Primary coding is a universal transmission process, and "language conversion + cultural docking" is one of them. The primary code is intended to be communicated to the outside world and is simply limited to local audiences. The secondary code is more extensive and applies to local and global audiences. The code of *Mulan*, while adapted to the tastes of local audiences and able to spread culture effectively, can lead to distortions in the cultures of the encoded countries, affecting their cultural identity(Fu et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Cultural background differences between Chinese and Western Audiences

Fear and loyalty are the core of the filial piety spirit inherited by the Chinese nation for thousands of years. It points out that Western civilization originated from the sea, and the small country and few people did not hesitate to expand to protect the rule. Therefore, Western culture is characterized by oceanic and is open.

4.3 Cross-cultural cognitive Problem Probe into the Dissemination Path of Chinese Culture Film and Television

4.3.1 Breaking down language barriers and lowering cultural discounts

We can better understand each other in cross-cultural communication and avoid cultural discrimination by removing barriers(Zhang et al., 2021). Language translation is a challenge because it does not fully understand the cultural background and character relationships in movies. Simple subtitles and native languages can only help us overcome this obstacle. A deeper understanding of different cultures and simplifying the film and television content can better capture the attention and affection of the target

audience. To make cultural works easier for consumers to understand, we should try to dub them into internationally accepted languages.

4.3.2 Decoding Cultural Commonality, Arousing Emotional Resonance

According to Maslow's demand theory, self-realization is an extremely important and vital need(Maslow, 1943). We can stimulate the audience's emotional resonance through film and television works and help them realize their self-worth. People share this need, and self-seeking and genuine feelings can cross borders. The dissemination of film and television culture is just a tool. Establishing effective communication and communication between creators and viewers is necessary to realize its value. In cross-cultural communication, it is essential to accurately locate and understand the cultural background and interests of the target audience. Pay attention to the emotional resonance of the audience to convey the essence of human culture. Through accurate film genres, presentation techniques, and the dissemination of values, valuable stories can be digested and encoded into targeted forms. The culture can be incorporated into the stories so that audiences can share value in subtle ways (Deng & Li, 2019).

4.3.3 The use of diversified means of communication

China's story can't just stay in a single communication mode. It is integrated into global business activities, cultural dissemination, and economic development. By combining market and audience needs, we are committed to creating quality texts that can be disseminated worldwide. By integrating domestic and foreign media resources, we can raise cultural awareness and use new media platforms to promote culture. The transformation of the media has allowed cultural communication to the traditional media and has more channels and means of output. Let the Chinese story spread better through the media platform. More people understand Chinese culture and spread the Chinese story in a cross-cultural context(Li, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Based on the theory of cultural difference and film semiotics, the following conclusions are drawn: 1)In the context of globalization, Chinese film and television communication should draw lessons from the Hollywood film production system. By following today's key social issues, film, and television works reflect the "universal value" of film and television in cultural communication(Xu, 2015). 2)According to the theory of cultural discount, [we should remove language barriers and better understand each other's cultures in cross-cultural communication, so subtitling translation is an important task. 3)Based on the theory of visual culture: according to John Fiske, film and television works convey information and visual culture that can shape and express cultural values(Xu, 2008). Therefore, film and television works should focus more on users' feelings and needs, excavate users' resonance, and encode them into valuable stories so that Guanzhou can obtain value sharing implicitly. 4)The means of communication should be diversified based on the conventional audience theory put forward by Robert Jaegher. This theory is influenced by their social background, values, and personal experiences. Therefore, the means of communication should be adopted in the means and means of communication.

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Notes

¹ Mulan: Hua Mulan, a legendary female soldier dressed as a man and serving in the army in place of her father, did not specify *Mulan's* family name, date, or place of origin. But from poetry, folk opera, and local county chronicles, they gradually developed into familiar indicators of ancient female military service, whose existence and ethnic affiliation are disputed.

² Mulan Ci: "*Mulan Poetry*", also known as "Mulan Ci", for the Yuefu poetry. It was written in the Northern Wei Dynasty, and some say it was written in the Tang Dynasty. It was originally recorded in the Southern Chen Dynasty as a music masterpiece. The full text is more than 300 words long.

³ "Alas oh alas! Alas oh alas! *Mulan* is weaving cloth of the topmost class. Listen, and you don't hear the spinning drone; "*Mulan Poetry*" from Yuefu Poems of the Northern and Southern Dynasties

⁴ Disney Company: The Walt Disney Company, also known as Disney and Disney, is a diversified multinational media group based in Burbank, California. Walt and Louie Disney founded Disney Brothers Cartoon Studios on October 16, 1923.

⁵ Mulan Poetry: "*Mulan Poetry*" is a folk song passed down and sung in China's Northern and Southern Dynasties. Guo Maoqian's "Yuefu Poetry Collection" is classified as "Yuefu Shuangbi" along with "Peacock Flying Southeast"

⁶ Dan Fengyun and Gao Ponytail: Danfeng eye usually refers to the shape of the female eye, showing a curved shape, sometimes called "willow eyebrows." In traditional Chinese culture, Danfeng Eye symbolizes feminine beauty, representing gentle, charming, and tender images like watery. In ancient Chinese poetry and painting, the depiction of Danfengyan of ten appears, conveying strong cultural connotations and aesthetic interest. In traditional Chinese culture, a high ponytail symbolizes women's youthful vitality, representing the image of youth, fashion, and vitality. In modern Chinese pop culture, a high ponytail hairstyle has been widely used in movies, TV dramas, animation, and other forms of entertainment.

⁷ Auspicious clouds: In Chinese culture, auspicious clouds represent good omens, happiness, good luck, and other good morals. It is widely used in painting, poetry, literature, traditional art, architecture, etc.

⁸ Hollywood films: Hollywood films are movies produced by the American film industry based in Hollywood, California. Hollywood is the center of the American film industry and has been the leading producer of movies worldwide for over a century

⁹ Cognitive difference: The difference between subject and object is a fundamental concept in cognitive psychology, which relates to how people perceive and understand the world around them.

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