The Creation and Operation Strategy of Disney’s Mulan: Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Discount

Rui Chen 1, Zhiyi Chen 1 and Yongzhong Yang 2,*

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore Disney Mulan’s cultural appropriation strategy and the cultural discount phenomenon formed in the Chinese market from the perspective of users and discuss the creation and operation strategy of the film. In 2020, Disney released a new film that originated in China, Mulan, but received negative reviews from the Chinese consumer market. Taking this as an example, this paper uses NVivo and ROSTCM to conduct content-coding and text analysis on creators’ interview records and consumer comments and seeks for the differences in understanding between Chinese audiences and creative teams. The results show that cultural appropriation is an effective strategy for film creation, but cultural appropriation based on misinterpretation will lead to cultural discounts in the operation of films. Therefore, corresponding strategies during film creation and operation should be adopted to better realize the sustainable development of culture.

Keywords: creation strategy; operation strategy; cultural discount; cultural appropriation; Disney; Mulan

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the cross-cultural communication of human beings and the global pandemic of culture, the cross-regional production, transmission, and consumption of cultural products have gradually attracted people’s attention. In this process, cultural appropriation has become the main way to create cultural products, and the cultural discount caused by cultural appropriation has also become one of the obstacles to the operation of cultural products. This cultural appropriation is the core strategy used by Disney to develop foreign markets, and it is also an important reason for the long-term sustainable development of Disney’s series of films. With their content-focused product development model, inclusive and diversified cultural atmosphere, and excellent business philosophy [1], they have quickly become successful in the Chinese domestic market, forming film brands that are widely recognized by consumers, and their products are favored by most Chinese audiences. At the same time, with the promotion of national cultural soft power by the Chinese government in recent years, with its unique cultural heritage and rich cultural connotation, the international spread of Chinese culture has gradually accelerated. Based on the two reasons above, some international film companies began to add Chinese cultural elements into their film creation and operation process, which not only arouses the cultural identity of Chinese audiences and increases the consumption potential of the film but also facilitates the spread of their unique culture around the world.

Disney’s Mulan was officially released in September 2020. “Mulan” originated from the long narrative poem “Song of Mulan” in the Northern Dynasty of China. It tells the story of a girl named Mulan who disguised herself as a man and joined the army for her father. She made great achievements on the battlefield. She refused the emperor’s reward, hoping only that her family could be reunited after the war was over. In this long narrative poem, the author highlights Mulan’s kindness and bravery and highly praises the value.
of defending her country and loving her homeland. Different from most poems about war, this poem is full of descriptions of scenes of daily life in ancient China, which has both story-telling and literary value. At the same time, the prerequisites for this poem to be adapted internationally are the unique Chinese culture and attractive story in the poem, which are also its main characteristics. Over the years, it has been appropriated and adapted by overseas creators from different cultural backgrounds and spread all over the world. Mulan originated in Chinese culture and eventually spread in the Chinese market. Cultural appropriation is a creative strategy of Disney’s Mulan.

In 1998, the animated film “Mulan” produced by Walt Disney was officially released. The director and screenwriter modified the content of the basic structure of the original story to a certain extent. In the end, the animated film “Mulan”, with its magnificent production and moving plot, won awards around the world, and, on large movie review websites, it garnered high score evaluations from the audiences. It has an 86% freshness rating (of a total 100%) on the US review website Rotten Tomatoes and a 7.9 out of 10 on the Chinese review website Douban.com. With the help of Chinese audiences’ recognition of their own culture, Disney successfully entered the Chinese market with this film, and, at the same time, brought Chinese culture to the world audience. Based on this success, Disney planned a live-action version of Mulan. The film went into production in 2018 and was eventually released in 2020. Despite the buzz, overall, the live-action Mulan did not follow up on the success of its animated predecessor, scoring 74% on Rotten Tomatoes and a mere 5.0 rating on Douban.com (as of December 2020). This film failed in the Chinese market, which also proves the cultural discount. Therefore, the film Mulan has considerable research value and significance.

The combination of western directors and Chinese cultural films is not a new occurrence, as seen with Kung Fu Panda. However, all three Kung Fu Panda films performed very well in the Chinese market (the first, second, and third films received 8.1, 8.0, and 7.7 scores on Douban.com respectively) and did not show cultural discounts, so they were not applicable to this study. From Mulan, it can be seen that when cultural appropriation is used as a film creation strategy, there may also be a cultural discount in the film operation process. However, what are the reasons for this phenomenon? Why does Mulan, a film based on cultural appropriation, face the problem of cultural discount when operating in the Chinese market?

2. Literature Review
2.1. Studies Related to Disney Movies

Disney is recognized for creating cultural products that have made significant contributions to many forms of media. Due to the huge influence of Disney in the global cultural industry, there are different directions of the research on Disney. There are two main levels of research related to this paper.

First, the discussion on narrative and creation of Disney films. This discussion involves two aspects: One, the study of the film content. Disney has long been known for the creation of animated stories, and the content has been discussed on many levels. These discussions show the multicultural images presented in Disney films, including race, gender, ethnicity, consumerism [2], as well as the representation of natural scenes in Disney’s 70-year animated film catalog [3]. This has prompted some academics to join a popular campaign against Disney. In addition, some studies have combined content from Disney films with other disciplines. For example, female roles, spiritual education, and children’s development education are analyzed through the narrative mode and narrative content of Disney films [4]. Or, by adopting the feminist method, through a systematic study of relevant Disney animated films, the narrative of raising and taking care of children in the films is discussed [5]. Then, the interpretation of the film works. The interpretation of Disney films can be made from a variety of theoretical perspectives such as cultural criticism and film criticism. Academic and cultural criticism mainly interprets works from the perspective of directorism, emphasizing similarities based on high-quality works and
personal signatures, and consciously differentiating between brand, style, and the role of creator [6].

Second, the discussion on the operation mode of Disney films. This operation mode involves three aspects: One, the discussion on the media and communication mode of Disney. Disney’s communication mode is to adapt animation into broadcast sound medium, emphasize aesthetics and character development, and increase consumers’ contact with the world and characters developed by Disney [7]. Disney’s films also provide fodder for theme parks and resorts, consumer products, and even cruise ships, forming a fully integrated media giant. Two, the discussion on the change of Disney’s film operation mode. Disney’s film operations are diverse and constantly changing. In the past, based on the operation experience of Disney’s animated films, the method it adopted was to explore its constructed cultural memory, highlighting the ubiquitous images in Disney’s popular children’s films and popular culture [8]. Now, in the creation of new films, Disney is building on past productions, responding to calls for greater diversity, and unleashing the potential of the imagination on a global scale. Nevertheless, it also has a homogenizing effect on global media culture. Moreover, Disney, rooted in corporate interests and cultural projection, has re-generated a post-colonial process [9]. It is worth noting that Disney is best known for creating feature-length animated films and that its theme parks are designed to transfer emotions associated with animation and movies to a three-dimensional reality, providing important psychological confirmation for children and adults alike. The animated films have become an important part of Disney’s development of experience economy, immersive environment, and art company [10]. Three, the research of Disney’s operation mode also involves the aspect of customer management. The Walt Disney Company has earned customer loyalty by establishing a strong relationship with customers [11].

2.2. Cultural Appropriation in Film Creation

The creation process of films is actually a process in which film directors, screenwriters, actors, and others select the above-mentioned elements and reshape them in a specific cultural environment and background [12]. Cultural appropriation refers to “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” [13], which is “a positive process”. Traditional culture and value are generated by the recognition and possession of consumers. However, because globalization is a threat to traditional culture, in order to survive, traditional cultures need to innovate and coexist with other global cultures [14]. Although often cited, the first explicit appearance of cultural appropriation in a paper since the last century was to explore the rhetorical tactics of feminist appropriation in order to evaluate its role as an anti-hegemonic strategy [15].

Cultural appropriation is a concept that is often paid attention to in media studies and rhetorical criticism [16,17]. However, in film creation, relevant studies pay more attention to the types of cultural appropriation. Cultural Appropriation in the field of art can be divided into three categories: Subject Appropriation, Content Appropriation, and Object Appropriation [18]. These three kinds of appropriation also exist in the creative process of film products.

In terms of Subject Appropriation of film creation, relevant studies mainly focus on discussing the outsider’s taking the culture or life of other cultural members as the narrative theme, and then discussing the impact and growth pattern of multiculturalism. For example, by discussing the appropriation of African culture in Hollywood movies, the paper discusses the impact of African culture on global culture. This ubiquitous form of culture reveals a wide range of cultural intermediation. This is a hallmark of our age of hyperlinks. In this kind of cultural appropriation, there is no longer an “original” or “faithful copy”, but only endless change in growth [19].

Content Appropriation in film creation is a more common way than the others. This kind of appropriation is not an entire work of art, but a style or form. For example, the study discusses the appropriation of Lesbian Subculture from novels to films [20], and further studies the dissemination and influence of relevant cultures.
In terms of Object Appropriation in film creation, relevant studies mainly focus on the possession of tangible objects (such as sculptures), which are transferred from the cultural members who produced them to outsiders. In the narrative process of cultural appropriation, the film draws relevant image clues from the commercial types of one culture but fills the form with content that is more suitable for other cultures, so that the film finds a meeting point between mass cultural discourse and nationalism [21].

Cultural appropriation in films may lead to multiculturalism. Art, as a process, plays a role in the appropriation and expression of culture, and film is a tool for further dissemination [22]. With the changing times and the development of science and technology, novel culture has been appropriated into TV and film. Between the written and the visual arts, two mediums, two cultures, have a vibrant dialogue and engage in complex social agendas. This additional dynamic of hybrid cosmopolitanism is sometimes satisfactory, and sometimes problematic [23]. In media studies, cultural appropriation is applied as a technology and methodology [24].

In addition, similar to the research method in this paper is the study of cultural appropriation in the practice of art. In Acousmatic electroacoustic music, although there is no problem with the general addition of cultural material, cultural appropriation may expose the composer to charges of superficial exoticism, cultural offense, or violation of personal or legal rights [25]. To avoid these charges, people in the music industry need to take the time to explore the true meaning of culture and show respect and understanding for the cultures of others so that people and music being studied are not devalued or exploited [26]. This provides a feasible reference for this study.

2.3. Cultural Discounts in Film Operations

The theory of cultural discount was first put forward by Colin Hoskins and R. Mirus in their paper in 1988. It refers to the fact that audiences in some countries or regions cannot identify with or understand an international product due to the differences in cultural background and structure, thus reducing the value of such product in the export market. They believe that some films and television works rooted in specific cultures can be recognized and understood by audiences based on the same experience and lifestyle, but they are difficult to be accepted by audiences with different beliefs, concepts, and historical cultures in other regions [27]. To be more specific cultural discount refers to the loss or reduction of the value of cultural products in the context of cross-culture and cross-region [28].

Operations are the content planning, promotion organization, and market control of film operational processes. The process of cross-cultural operation of films is always closely related to cultural discount. Generally speaking, the research on the causes of cultural discount is the most important part of cultural discount theory research. For film operation, there are many reasons for the formation of cultural discount.

The main cause of cultural discount is cultural distance. Cultural distance refers to the differences in cultural values among consumer groups in different regions and cultures [29]. In addition to the above reasons, some scholars have studied the formation of cultural discount in the operation of film products.

Firstly, in terms of the content operation of film products, the theme, type of film, source of the original story, place where the story took place or the film was shot, the actors involved, the race of the actors, the online promotion of the website, the response of the film critics, etc., may all be the reasons for the formation of cultural discount [12,30,31]. In addition, cultural specificity, which is composed of aesthetic specificity and content specificity, also affects cross-cultural communication of films [32].

Secondly, in terms of the promotion strategy of film products, the release date of the film and the language translation of the film will also have an impact on the attraction to the film [33,34]. Studies have also shown that the awards given films represent the quality of film’s content to some extent, and the resulting reputation signal has an impact on consumer choices in different countries [35,36].
Thirdly, in terms of market and consumer management of film products, the existing market conditions in the export regions of films are one of the influencing factors, and the market competition of the same theme determines the cross-cultural communication effect of films to some extent [37]. Additionally, consumers are an important subject of the market. From the perspective of consumers, audience heterogeneity is also one of the influencing factors for movie exports [38]. Different consumers of cultural products constitute many unique cultural markets, which are correlated with various audience dimensions, leading to cultural discount [39].

Also, national kinship (i.e., people’s interest in and admiration for a particular country) is also related to the desire to buy or consume other goods and services of that country [40].

It is important to point out that cultural discount is not fixed. Due to changes in consumers’ perception of novelty [41], cultural taste [42], and learning and imitation behavior [43], cultural discounts may change. This change is as follows: due to the influence of cultural discount and cultural premium factors, the relationship between cultural distance and product sales is U-shaped [44]. In addition, cultural distance may play a positive role in promoting the import of these cultural products [45].

To sum up, research on the application of cultural appropriation in film creation also focuses on social criticism and art but lacks the application in film, television, and cultural industry. The current research on cultural discount theory focuses more on the reasons for its formation. Consumers, works, and the market are the main reasons for the cultural discount. There is not much attention paid to the creation and operation process, and there is no corresponding explanation for the difficult acceptance of the live-action Mulan by audiences in China. From the perspective of the user, this article focuses on the film creation and operation of cultural appropriation and discount and makes recommendations for the future. Therefore, this paper analyzes the following problems:

Q1: How do Chinese audiences perceive and evaluate the live-action version of Mulan? What dimensions of perception do they have for these perceptions and emotions?
Q2: What is the knowledge and understanding of the film’s creative team? How do these understandings differ from the perception of Chinese audiences? What are the reasons for the difference?
Q3: Does the acceptance of Mulan in China contradict the theory of cultural discount? Why is there a cultural discount in the local Chinese market when cultural appropriation is used as a creative method of Mulan (which originated in China)? What are the strategies for future film creation and operation?

3. Methodology and Material
3.1. Research Methods

Critics and their commentary are found in all industries, but especially in the cultural industry. Critics’ reviews have a much greater impact on late box office receipts than early ones. A film review is a leading indicator of prediction [46]. Consumer ratings have a greater impact on the movie’s theatrical release time, while expert ratings have a greater impact on the film market as a whole [47]. Therefore, the analysis of audience evaluation can also reflect and predict the acceptance degree of the film by the audience and the box office performance of the film. Therefore, based on the audience evaluation of the live-action version of Mulan, this paper makes a concrete analysis of the audience evaluation and extracts the parts related to the film creation and operation. Combined with the interview records of the film creation team, the thesis analyzes whether cultural appropriation (as a creation method) constitutes cultural discount (in the operation process).

For the audience part, this study first used ROST CM (ROST content mining software developed by Professor Shen Yang, Wuhan University, China. It is mainly used for high-frequency word analysis and semantic network rendering of text content) to conduct text analysis on the collected user comments, and obtained the audience’s cognition, evaluation, and related dimensions, which were used as the basis for the subsequent content analysis of specific codes. Based on the above content, NVivo was
used to make detailed coding and analysis of users’ comments. For the director and the chief creative team, this study directly used NVivo software for text coding and analysis. Finally, the two results were compared to determine whether there was a cultural discount in the operation strategy in the creation method of cultural appropriation of the film Mulan and what the specific differences were. Finally, the conclusion of this study was drawn.

3.2. Sampling

The following two samples were used in this study:

Sample (1): Online reviews of the live-action Mulan by Chinese users posted on Douban.com. Douban.com, founded in 2005, is one of the largest community review websites in China. Its scoring rule allows users to give movies a rating from one to five stars (from low to high). Douban.com then calculates, in an undisclosed way, to come up with a rating score out of 10 (This was where Douban.com ratings came from in the Introduction section; Appendix A). The site only shows some of the different star-level ratings. User reviews on this site are divided into two sections: short comments and film reviews. The short comments are short and concise, reflecting the audience’s comments. Film reviews are detailed but long. User reviews on the website can objectively reflect Chinese audiences’ views on films to a certain extent.

Sample (2): Transcripts of interviews with director Niki Caro and the cast and crew about the live-action Mulan. It includes information about the creation and operation strategy of the live-action Mulan, their understanding of the story of Mulan and the spiritual values conveyed by the character, and the positioning of the story of Mulan in the promotion of the film. This information objectively reflects the director and the main creative team’s understanding of the story of “Mulan” and its characters, and to some extent reflects their understanding of Chinese culture and the spirit of the Chinese nation.

It must be noted that during the preparation and release of the film Mulan, the director, the lead producer, and the leading team were interviewed by many different media about the film, but due to time constraints and other factors (especially the confidentiality measures before the film is released), the information contained in these interviews is limited and, therefore, does not fully reflect the director and the creative team’s deep understanding of the story and characters.

3.3. Data Extraction

All data were extracted in December 2020. Sample (1) extracted all the film reviews and short comments publicly presented on Douban.com, including 405 short comments and 3141 film reviews. Then the sample is manually screened, and the invalid content that has no clear meaning and nothing to do with the film is deleted. In order to solve the problem of Q1, ROST CM and NVivo 11 were used to analyze the word frequency and code the extracted content.

In order to solve the questions about the opinions of the main creative team in Q2, sample (2) included searching for the keywords “Mulan director”, “Mulan” and “Nikki Caro” in the public pages of the webpage, and screening the information related to the live-action Mulan film. As well as a brief introduction of the film on IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes’ “Mulan” information pages, the main comment is the film’s official spiritual value proposition. This paper also finished the content analysis of the information above. All the interview materials consist of video and text materials.
4. Content Analysis and Coding Results

4.1. Chinese Audience’s Acceptance and Understanding of the Film

4.1.1. Short Comments

As mentioned above, users’ short comments on Douban.com are relatively short and have a certain representative meaning of users’ opinions. They can precisely distill the main points of the audience. In order to solve Q1, the user’s short comments on Douban.com were collected first, and the high-frequency words were counted in Table 1. After excluding the irrelevant lexical items from the high-frequency lexical items, and obtaining the audience’s cognition, evaluation, and related dimensions, the following were used as the basis for the subsequent content analysis of specific codes:

| Story Creation | The Audience Cognition | The Audience Emotion |
|----------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Dimension | Words | Frequency | Dimension | Words | Frequency | Positive | Frequency |
| story | 68 | | Liu Yifei | 98 | | expectant | 17 |
| scenario | 60 | | character | 40 | | good | 15 |
| special effect | 16 | | acting | 40 | | moving | 8 |
| picture | 13 | | witch | 33 | | excellent | 7 |
| setting | 13 | | Gong Li | 27 | | amazing | 5 |
| scene | 12 | | actor | 26 | | awkward | 35 |
| action | 11 | | villain | 14 | | bad | 31 |
| costume | 10 | | emperor | 14 | | poor | 25 |
| core | 9 | | act | 11 | | one star | 24 |
| emotion | 9 | | Jet Li | 9 | | disappointing | 16 |
| design | 9 | | culture | 54 | | waste | 10 |
| plot | 8 | | female | 46 | | unreasonable | 9 |
| making | 8 | | women’s rights | 23 | | unaccustomed | 9 |
| aesthetic | 8 | | era | 10 | | gross | 7 |
| martial arts | 8 | | identity | 10 | | boring | 7 |
| war | 7 | | fairytale | 9 | | no good | 7 |
| logic | 7 | | history | 9 | | nondescript | 6 |
| value | 7 | | self | 8 | | failure | 6 |
| shot | 7 | | tradition | 8 | | unevaluated | 6 |
| music | 7 | | growth | 8 | | mess | 5 |
| rhythm | 7 | | nation | 7 | | |
| style | 6 | | politics | 5 | | |
| texture | 5 | | country | 5 | | |
| worth | 5 | | | | | |

Therefore, it can be concluded that the cognitive dimension Chinese audiences had for the live-action version of Mulan mainly lies in three aspects: story creation, actors and characters, and content and connotation in Table 1. In terms of cognitive dimension, first, Chinese audiences pay the highest attention to the story creation of the film, which involves many aspects, including the plot, production, subject matter, and other film and television creation, storytelling, and even the background music. Secondly, the cognitive dimension that audiences pay attention to lies in content and connotation. Chinese audiences generally believe that the film explains and praises feminism and affirms women’s self-growth and self-value. In addition, the film presents traditional Chinese cultural values, especially
people’s loyalty to the country and the nation. Finally, it is worth noting that there is a strong celebrity effect in China. In the short comments, the names of the actors or characters in the film are mentioned many times, and the acting evaluation of the actors is also involved. In terms of emotional dimension, the analysis results of high-frequency words show that although there are positive words such as “wonderful” and “moving”, Chinese audiences generally have a low evaluation of the live-action version of Mulan, considering the use of “bad” and “awkward”.

4.1.2. Film Review

Based on these views, Chinese audiences trawled online movie reviews on Douban.com. The film reviews and short comments on Douban.com are two parts that are different from each other. The film reviews are longer, with distinct views, professional and detailed comments, and some practical suggestions. Therefore, an analysis of film reviews is suitable for in-depth and specific research on the audience’s evaluation and opinions on the film creation and operation. In order to solve Q1, the audience’s film reviews on Douban.com were selectively searched and 10% of the reviews from five stars to one star were extracted according to other users’ degree of approval of the reviews. Among them, there were 58 five-star reviews, 40 four-star reviews, 58 three-star reviews, 55 two-star reviews, and 47 one-star reviews, a total of 258 reviews (only part of the ratings is displayed, but not all. That’s why the result seems quite balanced; Appendix A). Articles and comments may be encoded multiple times.

In order to ensure the validity and scientific nature of the coding, other members of the research team were invited to conduct independent coding in groups after detailed training and full communication. After the coding of the two groups was finished, the percentage of reliability and kappa coefficient [26] were tested using the coding comparison in NVivo. Coding comparisons are calculated for each major category (story creation, content and connotation, and actors and characters). In this paper, the results of the two coding groups were compared and verified mutually, and the test results in Appendix C showed that the percentage of coding consistency reached more than 90%. For the coding results with inconsistent codes, the two groups of coders discussed and determined the coding scheme again, and the final coding results were as follows (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The main cognitive dimensions of the Chinese audience.](image-url)
Dimension 1: Story creation. According to the coding results, the story creation was the most concentrated part and accounted for the largest proportion of audience film reviews, which indicated that Chinese audiences paid more attention to the story creation process and strategy. In terms of story creation, audience attention was mainly divided into six elements: production, plot logic, shots and pictures, narrative mode, character setting, and language translation. The proportional distribution of coding reference points was as follows:

From the results shown in Figure 2, in terms of production, Chinese audiences generally believed that the makeup, costumes, props, color matching, and special effects in the drama were “bad”, “awkward”, and “unrealistic”, and did not conform to the reality of Chinese history and culture. The film was just a patchwork of Chinese elements and symbols, and it was not aesthetically pleasing. This film model is “aesthetic Orientalism”. In terms of plot logic, many viewers thought that the plot of the film was “compact”, but in general, it was “unreasonable” and “logically confused”. The process of growth and self-awakening that should have had a heavier focus was too smooth and “far removed” from historical reality. In terms of shots and pictures, the audience praised the film’s framing and visual effects. In particular, snow mountains, grasslands, Yardang Landform, and other natural scenery and palace scenes of the architectural composition were magnificent. In terms of narrative mode, the film mainly told a story of self-awareness and growth. Generally speaking, the narration was too smooth, but some viewers think the narration was “gentle” and the expression was “poor”, meaning the transformation of characters and plot, in the end, seemed too abrupt. In terms of character setting, the audience gave more comments on the two roles (Mulan and Xianniang). However, it was generally believed that the film did not provide enough narrative for the growth of Mulan, so it was not easy to have an emotional resonance with her. The behavior of the character Xianniang was logically confused and inexplicable. In terms of language translation, Chinese audiences have a low acceptance of the English dubbing of movies, considering it too “incompatible” and the lines in the film did not conform to Chinese idioms. In addition, audiences also complained about the translation of the poem Mulan in the film, which was seen as an explicit manifestation of the incongruity between the Western cultural background of the creative team and Chinese culture. In general, Chinese audiences paid the highest attention to the story creation strategy and process of Mulan but gave low opinions. According to the coding results, in this part, the coverage ratio of negative comments in the coded reference points was 4 times higher than that of positive comments. It must be pointed out that story creation had little connection with culture. However, according to the survey results, Chinese audiences’ attention to story creation surpassed their attention to cultural content.

Figure 2. Ratio of coding reference points for story creation dimensions.
Dimension 2: content and connotation. In addition to the creation of the story, Chinese audiences were most concerned about the content expressed in the film. In terms of content and connotation, audiences mainly paid attention to the three elements—cultural connotation, type, and theme and spirit—presented during the film creation and operation. The proportional distribution of coding reference points is as follows:

In Figure 3, in terms of cultural connotation, Chinese audiences paid the highest attention to the cultural connotation but had the lowest evaluation of the Chinese cultural connotation presented by the film. It was widely believed that the Chinese elements in the film were more like “Chinese elements in the eyes of the west” than real Chinese elements. The director and the main creative team piled up the things with Chinese symbols and Chinese characteristics, including the stereotype of China. Even the film itself just used a Chinese story as the shell and western culture as the actual core. The “loyal, brave and true” description of Mulan they claimed in the film operation to embody traditional Chinese culture was what some audiences thought of as superficial and simple values. In the theme and spirit, part of the audience approved of the feminist writing in the film. It was believed that the film praised the awakening and growth of women, praised the power of women, and embodied universal and modern values. However, other viewers felt the film lacked any real discussion of feminism. The emphasis on feminism in the film buried the original spiritual value of Mulan’s story, and the film reflected the typical individual heroism instead, which was contrary to the original intention of Mulan’s story. In terms of the type of the movie, audiences generally believe that this was a typical Disney commercial “princess series” film, which conformed to the structure of “fairytale”, so it was inconsistent with both the art and the claimed “heroic epic” narrative. For this part, the proportion of negative comments was much higher than the positive comments.

Figure 3. Ratio of coding reference points for content and connotation dimensions.

Dimension 3: actors and characters. In addition to the above two parts, the audience mainly paid attention to the dimension of actors and characters, which included two elements: acting and character meaning. The proportional distribution of coding reference points was as follows:

From Figure 4, in terms of character connotation, most of the audience focused on the discussion of Mulan and Xianniang, believing that Mulan was brave, kind, and stubborn, not yielding to reality and fate, but having the spirit of resistance. However, the portrayal of the characters in the film failed because of the lack of growth process. As for the acting, the main controversy centered on Liu Yifei, who plays Mulan. Some audiences gave low opinions on Liu Yifei’s acting, while others thought her acting was good. Others gave positive comments on other actors and their acting. In this section, there are many negative comments from the audience and almost no positive comments.
4.2. The Director and the Creative Team’s Understanding of the Film

As mentioned above, in order to solve Q2, the interview records of the creative team and the introduction of the film in the information pages of “Mulan” on IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes were analyzed. The analysis results can reflect the official understanding of the “Mulan” story and its spiritual core and reflect their understanding of Chinese culture and spirit to a certain extent. The analysis results in Figure 6 showed that the understanding of the film’s creators was divided into three categories:

First, cultural understanding. Cultural understanding refers to the part in the interview where the chief creative team talks about the cultural connotation during their creation and operation process of Mulan, including the Chinese culture and the story of Mulan in the chief creative team’s understanding. In the interview, it was mentioned that in order to understand Chinese culture and the story of Mulan, the main creative team came to China many times and learned relevant Chinese culture. They used this as a basis for the creation of the film’s related design and the operation strategy. For the part about Chinese culture, the main focus of the creative team was the understanding of Chinese cultural elements, such as the use of location to show the geographical features of China, and the association between the dragon and the emperor.
Second, character understanding. Character understanding refers to the main creative team’s understanding of the character, spirit, and other aspects of Mulan. According to the interview transcript, the creative team believed that Mulan’s personality is “smart, strong and gentle”. She is particularly strong and has a sense of faith. She is a true, genuine character, and a fighter. In terms of spirit, the creative team believed that Mulan was not a superhero, but an ordinary person who used her wisdom and faith to overcome difficulties. To draw value from this character meant understanding and being true to oneself.

Third, value understanding. Value understanding refers to the creative team’s understanding of the film’s positioning and the spiritual core transmitted by the film. In terms of film positioning, the film was defined as an “adventure and action film” while operating. They believed that movies should be magnificent, exciting, and epic. Although it contained some romantic elements, they tried to make the film realistic, aiming to depict the war. On the spiritual front, the film’s main cultural message was “Loyal, Brave, True,” according to IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes’ pages on “Mulan”. In interviews, the team said the film presented a “determined beauty of women in action” that celebrated women’s will and strength. In addition, the director noted that women made up a large proportion of the main production staff during the creation and operation of Mulan. Since it was a film about women’s power, it was a way to encourage other studios to give other women a chance.

![Figure 6. Percentage of primary cognition of the director and creative team.](image)

In addition, there were some interviews about the use of shots and emotional expression in the process of film creation and operation in the interview records, which will not be repeated here.

5. Discussion

5.1. Differences in Understanding

According to the coding results, the differences between the understanding of Mulan by the director and the creative team and the Chinese audience in Q2 are as follows:

- The difference between the spirit of the main idea and the understanding of the characters. It must be pointed out that the director’s understanding of Mulan’s story is not completely wrong. In ancient China, the reasons why the story of Mulan has been handed down from thousands of years ago to the present day lie in its feminism. The story breaks the traditional gender norms, which is consistent with the western feminist discourse to some extent. The most important narrative of this story for Disney is the gender issue, which they put as the core, constructing the contradiction between the genders, and exploring the conflict between the whole society and the individual development during the process of creation and operation [48]. However, this practice actually hides the spiritual value of Mulan in China. In the perception of Chinese people, filial piety and defense of the country are her most valuable qualities.
However, these qualities are interpreted and alienated by Disney as a sign of Mulan’s personal value after the failure of the blind date, which shows her strong individualism. Disney films have made her almost a “superhero” when creating and operating in the Hollywood context [49].

- Lack of attention to story creation. Obviously, the creative team paid little attention to the problems of story creation and paid no attention to the narrative mode and logical structure of the story during the creation and operating process, which is the focus of the Chinese audience when watching. In addition to the cultural connotation, audiences are more concerned about whether the characters’ behaviors are logical and whether the story is told in an attractive way, which determines whether the audience can resonate with the movie. This kind of problem seems to be less forgivable by Chinese audiences than cultural differences. Apparently, the film’s portrayal of Xianniang was most criticized by audiences, who felt that the characters lacked the necessary growth process. Therefore, there is a big problem in the logic of the characters’ behavior before and after, and the audience cannot be persuaded. Such omissions in the characterization of characters occur in more than one place in the film, which is a big mistake in film creation and an important reason why the film gets poor reviews from the Chinese audience in the operation process.

- A wrong perception of Chinese culture. Although directors have made a lot of efforts to understand Chinese culture, their understanding of Chinese culture is limited to the elements and symbols, and they have little understanding of the real cultural connotation. As a result, Chinese elements can be seen everywhere in the film creation and operation, but only on a surface level without reaching the core. The false geographical perception of the creative team in Mulan was the most criticized by Chinese audiences: the earth buildings of Fujian Province in the north, the meadows and snowy mountains of New Zealand, the untimely couplets, and lanterns, etc. This is a typical Western cultural world-building. It only develops a basic sense of Chinese image when viewing [50]. In fact, Disney’s dynamic rewriting of Mulan resulted in the perpetualization of the paradigm of Middle Eastern factionalism in the Western context and simplified the folk narrative into a static and unified whole [51].

These differences in understanding between Chinese audiences and American creators are actually rooted in the differences between pre-modern and modern ethics, the distance and differences between ancient Chinese society and modern Western society [52], which is also social distance. In fact, the story of Mulan has been constantly adapted in Chinese history, and the adapters of different times have more or less placed the corresponding spirit of the current times into the adaptions of the story [53]. The story of Mulan was introduced to the United States in the early 20th century, and its three spreading peaks are closely related to the historical and cultural trend of thought in the United States. In this process, cultural receivers will inevitably select, adjust and adapt information according to their own standards, which forms cultural filtering in the process of communication [54]. Therefore, as one of the typical cases of folk narratives inherited under multiple media, Mulan has been continuously accepted and adapted, and people who are narrated have chosen different ways of expression based on their own cultural background and moral judgment, which determines the internal trend of media and folk narratives [55]. In modern times, the interpretation of Mulan’s narrative styles is actually a subversion of the classic and traditional narrative. [56] This is also reflected in Disney’s creation and operation of Mulan.

Therefore, the problem in Q3 can be solved: as a work with Chinese cultural connotation, the reason why it is reviewed poorly by the audience in the Chinese market lies in the social distance and difference between Chinese culture and the creative team, which is due to the cultural discount and cultural misinterpretation formed by the spread of the Chinese story Mulan in the United States. In Mulan’s creation, cultural appropriation based on misinterpretation leads to a cultural discount in the operation process. This is not contrary to the theory of cultural discount, because the creation and operation of a text will affect
the formation of cultural discount. Cultural appropriation is a way of film creation, but due to Disney’s misreading of other cultures, it leads to a cultural discount in the process of film operation.

5.2. Corresponding Strategy

For creators, in order to realize the commercial creation and sustainable development of cultural products, they must balance the relationship between the country of culture and the country of cultural creation and seek a balance point to achieve the cultural consistency and identity of both sides. Cultural appropriation can indeed be an effective way for cultural products to enter the overseas market. However, in the process of creation and operation, film creators should take the issue of cultural discount into account in order to ensure the sustainable development of the film and even the Chinese culture. The specific strategies during film creation and operation are as follows:

5.2.1. To Grasp the Theme of the Original Story

For the creation of film products, in the process of cross-cultural communication, emotional communication has more advantages than other communication methods when facing the complex and strangeness of national conditions. Therefore, in the creation of cultural products, the “common emotion” caused by similar feelings should be used as the medium, transcend the artificial national boundaries and cultural systems, eliminate the ideological and language barriers, and establish a common understanding and identification of the communication content [57].

For the operation of film products, social media platforms are an effective form of media, which can be used to establish an emotional connection with the audience and promote the content that makes the audience resonate with the movie’s protagonist [58].

In Mulan, the director puts feminism at the heart of the emotional connection between different cultures. However, there is a problem in today’s feminist propaganda and activities: although new media and new narrative methods have produced the image of feminists, they have avoided feminist problems that are not coordinated with the platform interaction order. They amplify the expression of feminism while limiting it to the scope of audience acceptance and preference [59]. This is also the director’s problem in the film narrative, so feminism is not an appropriate emotional entry point.

5.2.2. To Emphasis More on Story Creation

Although the research focuses on cultural discount, narrative is also the key to film creation according to the results. Wonderful narration can make people ignore cultural differences and cultural misinterpretation to some extent, which is also one of the reasons why the animated Mulan has gained high marks in China.

For the creation of film products, narration is the most attractive aspect of film works. If you ignore the storytelling, it is equivalent to ignoring the core part of the film. Research shows that in the adaptation of Mulan, Disney created and satisfied global tastes and created an alternative narrative that no longer conveyed the message or meaning of the original [60].

For the operation of film products, in the pursuit of multicultural integration, they ignored the basic creation of the text, resulting in basic plot logic errors and an unattractive narrative rhythm. The core competitiveness of a film is always the content resources, and only by the careful forging and effective development of the content resources can a film be attractive to its consumers [61].

5.2.3. To Learn Other Cultures

For the creation of film products, filmmakers should be devoted to a thorough study of different cultures and try to overcome cultural psychological distance and social distance.

For the operation of film products, adjusting the work mode of transmission flexibly, and strengthening the communication with the audience directly, highlighting the concept
of the brand, is the only way the cross-cultural communication of the works can be effectively carried out [62]. For a very long period of time, the film industry has been in the center of leisure and culture. Manufacturers need to reach the right combination of business and culture in movies to adapt to different national conditions and development situation in different countries, regions, and inject the particularities of countries that develop the consumer’s cultural identity, to make a product of their own unique market appeal [63]. The success factors of films in different cultures and countries are alterable and paying attention to specific regional factors is the key to success [64].

There is no denying the knowledge of Chinese culture that the directorial team of Mulan has. However, a superficial understanding will only lead to a large mix of cultural elements in the process of creation and operation, and no depths will be developed in the hearts of the audiences.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, we live in a world of cultural globalization, and cultural appropriation is an effective way for film creation, as well as the key to cross-cultural communication of cultural products. However, due to the existence of cultural misreading, the film products have generated corresponding cultural discounts in the operation process.

Of course, objectively speaking, if we do not live in a particular country or cultural background, we cannot fully know and understand the real-life culture of this country. However, this does not mean that the cross-cultural creation and operation of cultural products is impossible. In order to avoid cultural misreading and cultural discount, creators need to find a universal emotional entry point, combine emotional value with individual experience, and deeply study different forms of cultures, especially the culture from its home country. In addition, cross-cultural creators should attach importance to narrative creation, so as to successfully achieve cultural appropriation and complete the cultural commercial creation process and realize the integration of traditional cultural works and innovative products.

On the one hand, this is a strategy that should be adopted in the creation and operation of films. On the other hand, according to this case, the sustainable development of Chinese culture also depends on the mutual communication and learning between foreign countries and China, the emotional resonance of globalization, and the innovation and emphasis on narrative. We can also realize that due to cultural globalization, at the macro level, China and even other countries continue to innovate the sustainable development strategy of culture, and cultural appropriation is only a small part of it. In fact, it is better for a country to enhance its own cultural strength, carry out effective cultural propaganda, and form a positive orientation. Only in this way can they form the driving force for the sustainable development of culture.

The limitation of this study lies in two parts:

First, the diversity of research samples needs to be improved. Although the selected online platform is one of the largest user review sites, and the user activity is high, not all viewers use online reviews, and those who do are not limited to this type of social media. According to the Appendix B iResearch index from 2019 to 2020, the gender ratio of Douban.com users is basically the same, and more than 60% of its users are between 19 and 35 years old, mostly in economically developed regions in eastern China. However, according to other studies, 80% of the total audience of Chinese animated films are young people between 20 and 40 years old. It is credible to take the audience of Douban as the object of observation in this study.

Second, the case study has yet to be expanded. Due to many reasons, such as the familiarity of national culture and the limitation of the number of films, this paper only pays attention to Mulan. In fact, there are many films that have adopted the method of cultural appropriation and resulted in cultural discounting.

Therefore, future research directions should include: analysis of the differences in cultural understanding among users of other ages or even all ages, studies of the relevant
cultural appropriation and cultural discount of other similar films, and analysis of the phenomenon of cultural discount of films from the perspective of creation and operation. We expect more research results to emerge.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here:  https://movie.douban.com/subject/26357307/ and  https://index.iresearch.com.cn/new/#/pc/detail?id=2949&Tid=93&kid=3021 (accessed on 3 March 2021).

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### Appendix A

Douban.com, founded in 2005, is one of the largest community review websites in China. It provides a large amount of information about books, movies, music, and other works to its users. In addition, both information description and comment ratings on the website are provided by users themselves (User-generated Content). Douban.com’s scoring rule is that users can give movies from one to five stars (from low to high) when they rate them. Douban.com then calculates, in an undisclosed way, to come up with a rating score out of 10 (This is where Douban.com ratings come from in the Introduction).

On Douban.com, the rating is inconsistent with the display of comments. Douban.com, based on a user’s credit and other users’ “degree of approval” of a user’s comments, calculates that only part of the ratings is displayed, but not all. In the case of Mulan, there are 3388 reviews on douban.com, including 590 five-star reviews, 404 four-star reviews, 600 three-star reviews, 561 two-star reviews, and 479 one-star reviews (which means the number of different star reviews we’ve collected is roughly equal). In fact, only 5% of all reviewers give five-star reviews, 9.9% give four-star reviews, 33% give three-star reviews, 34.2% give two-star reviews, and 17.9% give one-star reviews. To ensure the credibility of the study, we extracted 10 percent of the number of star reviews and deliberately selected those rated highly by other users during the extraction process.

References to audience evaluation of Mulan in Appendix A: Douban.com data. “Mulan (2020)”. https://movie.douban.com/subject/26357307/ (accessed on 3 March 2021).

### Appendix B

Research sampling in the sample (1) the references from the description: iResearch data. The iResearch index Douban.com.  https://index.iresearch.com.cn/new/#/pc/detail?id=2949&Tid=93&kid=3021 (accessed on 3 March 2021).

By December 2020, male users accounted for 55.27 percent and female users accounted for 44.73 percent on Douban.com. Users aged 18 and below accounted for 7.78%; 19 to 24 years old users accounted for 28.26%; 24.8% between 25 and 30 years old; Those aged between 31 and 35 accounted for 17.36%; People aged 36 to 40 accounted for 12.97%; Over 40 years old accounted for 8.83%.

According to the survey report “Research on Film Genre Audience and Preference Based on Text Sentiment Analysis” jointly published by researchers of the Administration
Center of Digital Film Content and China Research Institute of Film Science & Technology in 2019: Among the audiences of Chinese animated films, only 7% of total are under the age of 20, while about 80% are between 20 and 40. Therefore, it is credible to take the audience of Douban.com as the object of observation in this study.

Appendix C

The results of coding consistency test of audience cognition

In order to ensure the reliability of coding, the other seven members of the research team were invited to code independently after detailed training and full communication. At the end of coding, the percentage of reliability was tested by the coding comparison in NVivo.

Table A1. Kappa and percentage consistency test results.

| Node                    | Material Resource | Kappa | Consistency (%) | Inconsistency (%) |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------|-----------------|-------------------|
| story creation          | Five-star film review | 0     | 97.94           | 2.06              |
| story creation          | Four-star film review | 0.0673| 95.49           | 4.51              |
| story creation          | Three-star film review | 0.1776| 96.22           | 3.78              |
| story creation          | Two-star film review | 0.3392| 97.12           | 2.88              |
| story creation          | One-star film review | 0.2926| 97.35           | 2.65              |
| content and connotation| Five-star film review | 0     | 98.69           | 1.31              |
| content and connotation| Four-star film review | 0.1846| 97.69           | 2.31              |
| content and connotation| Three-star film review | 0.1329| 97.16           | 2.84              |
| content and connotation| Two-star film review  | 0.1886| 97.92           | 2.08              |
| content and connotation| One-star film review  | 0.2886| 96.97           | 3.03              |
| actor and character     | Five-star film review | 0     | 98.59           | 1.41              |
| actor and character     | Four-star film review | 0.0922| 98.58           | 1.42              |
| actor and character     | Three-star film review | 0.1731| 98.94           | 1.06              |
| actor and character     | Two-star film review  | 0.1128| 99              | 1                 |
| actor and character     | One-star film review  | 0.343 | 98.76           | 1.24              |

Kappa coefficient is a measure of classification accuracy. The calculation formula is as follows:

\[ k = \frac{p_o - p_e}{1 - p_e} \]

Figure A1. Kappa calculation formula.

The explanation for kappa value is: less than 0.40 is poor consistency, 0.40 to 0.75 is generally good consistency, and more than 0.75 is good consistency. The kappa value in the test results was poor, but the consistency percentage was higher than 90%, which means that the two groups coded the same content in the material, but the coding results were different. The reason for this coding result lies in the inconsistency between individual reading and thinking. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, the final conclusion of this study adopts the joint discussion results and opinions of two groups of members.

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