

Praises of Household Happiness in Social Turmoil: *Lady General Hua Mulan* (1964)

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Abstract

The relationship between film and culture can be seen from the adaptations that historical fiction films make on these original ancient stories or literary works under the influence of concurrent cultural contexts. In other words, these films are always used to reflect and react on the times in which they are made, instead of the past in which they are set. Therefore film makers add abundant up-to-date elements into traditional stories and constantly explore new ways of narration, an effort that turns their productions into live records of certain social and historical periods, combining macro and micro approaches to cultural backgrounds, both audible and visual. Pinning on this new angle of reviewing the old days, this paper aims to uncover the identity crisis of Hong Kong residents under the mutual influence of nostalgia and rebellious ideas in the 1960s reconstructed in the Huangmei Opera film *Lady General Hua Mulan* (1964) together with the analysis of the social historical reasons hidden behind. The director's intention to steer a middle course between traditional Chinese culture and British colonial culture is also discussed to show the reaction of film on cultural development.

Keywords

Film and Culture, Nostalgia, Rebellion, Youth Problem, Identity Crisis

1. Introduction

Film and culture interplay with each other. According to Graeme Turner, these two “share a common interest in the textual analysis of popular forms (*i.e.* the cinemas)” [1]. This research intends to use historical fiction film as a good subject for research to figure out the mutual actions between film and culture in detail. The sample film, which is adapted from the folk story on a Chinese girl, Hua Mulan, who disguises as a male soldier to replace her sick and aging father in the army and fights for the country, is explored with the combined use of compara-

tive historical analysis and textual analysis. The former one “allows us to address many exciting ‘big’ questions about patterns in entire societies or over time” and “brings clarity to many methodological concerns found in other research techniques” [2], a perfect solution for the examination of social processes that operate across time and places and lead to specific outcomes (like war or the introduction of a new ideology). And the latter methodology uncovers the detailed uses of cinematic techniques, such as the organization of mise-en-scène and sound, which all together make a difference in the audience perception and reception.

In detail, *Lady General Hua Mulan* is a Huangmei Opera film produced in Hong Kong in 1964. In this filmic edition, Mulan is a filial girl who has great martial skills. Seeing her old father, who suffers from asthma, struggling to go to the frontline, she tries in vain to persuade him to allow her to replace him. In order to let him change his mind, she puts on the male attire and wins her father in a martial competition without letting him know her real identity. Such a victory earns her father’s permission to join the army. At the beginning of her military years, she is too ambitious to be satisfied with the position as guidance of the military warehouse. But with the persuasion of General Li, she realizes that every position is important for the army to function properly and begins to work harder. Later with her caution and brevity, she finds out the enemy’s secret movements and makes a great contribution to her army’s success in the decisive battle. Marking twelve years excellent job in the front, Mulan chooses to go back and to take care of her ailing parents, after refusing the commander’s promise of further promotion and his marriage proposal on behalf of his daughter. Before returning home, she uses metaphors to promise General Li that if possible she will marry him. However, it is a pity that the latter cannot understand her. Only when the General visits Mulan later does he realize her real gender and accept her love.

By reflecting two very different ideas at that time, the nostalgia and the rebellious mood, the 1964 film depicts the identity crisis of people of Hong Kong during the reconstruction after war. In other words, the residents’ identity crisis is shown both from some people’s assertion for the revitalization of the traditional virtues, such as filial piety and loyalty, and from some others’ rebellious assertions against present social regulations. The director intends to steer a middle course between these two sides by making up a dreamland of harmonious family orders which contain both traditional and rebellious elements. Therefore the character of the heroine gets more complexity, as on the one point she is a filial daughter and on the other she breaks the traditional limitations for the females with her great achievements as a soldier, a position reserved only for males in the past. Albeit complex, all her behaviours are taken out of one clear goal—the happiness of the whole family. Besides, the addition of supporting roles is also out of the film’s emphasis on the mutual love between family members. Then with the analysis of the reason for and the status of the identity crisis of Hong Kong residents, this paper will discuss that the fundamental idea of the producers in making this movie is the praise of household happiness which could serve as a proper solution for their identity problem as it’s always easier to find one’s position in a family than in the whole society.

2. A Fairyland in the Turmoil of 1960s

The 1960s was a turbulent period in Hong Kong as a result of the interweaving of historical and temporary factors. Back to August 30th, 1945, the United Kingdom who had seized Hong Kong as its colony since 1839¹, took it back from the Japanese control. As during WWII, the peninsula was possessed by Japanese invaders whose more-than-three-year ruling left much trouble for its future development, such as the famines and the pandemic. People there struggled in hardships all day long for a living. After more than a decade’s reconstruction, the living conditions in Hong Kong were improved a lot. In the meantime, local population increased sharply as the result of the baby boom and the pouring in of waves of refugees from mainland China. However, new problems occurred as the “infrastructures like housing, medical care, water supplies, transportation, and education initiated in the 1950s were severely inadequate to serve the rapid population growth” [3]. When social constructions cannot meet actual needs, people became worried. Different kinds of thoughts appeared at the same time and conflicted with each other. The most representative ones were the left wing which inclined to Communism, and the right wing that was in sympathy with the Kuomintang government in Taiwan. The opposition between them

¹In 1839, Britain invaded China and occupied Hong Kong, a sparsely inhabited island off the coast of southeast China. Two years later, China ceded the island to the British, and in 1898, Britain was granted an additional 99 years of rule over Hong Kong under the Second Convention of Peking. History.com Staff, (2010). “Hong Kong ceded to the British”. Retrieved from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hong-kong-ceded-to-the-british> (accessed Jan. 25th, 2016).

caused time and again social disorders, such as the 1956 riots² and the 1967 leftist riots³. Such an environment stirred the needs for films to be a shelter from present economic hardships and social turmoil.

As mentioned above, the 1964 *Mulan* film was a masterpiece of the Huangmei Opera films (“yellow plum melody films”). In fact, the popularity of this kind of film, which featured in combining film text with the Huangmei Opera dubbing, answered to these aforesaid acquirements. Referring to the content, it was mainly about the love story of historical figures with the addition of comedy elements, which could satisfy the audience who were struggling in hardships. The prosperity of this filmic genre could be traced back to 1958, when a mainland Huangmei Opera film called *Tian Xian Pei* gained great box-office success in Hong Kong. After that, the famous director Li Hanxiang persuaded RunRun Shao, the boss of the Shao Brother’s Company, to produce their own Huangmei Opera movies. In the wake of Li’s *Diao Chan* (1958) and *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1950), more than two hundred films of this kind were on performance in the later decades. This period was later called the twenty-year golden age of Huangmei Opera films in Hong Kong.

In detail, two elements of the Huangmei Opera films have much to do with its great success. First is the melody. Being an ancient folk opera in China with hundreds of years’ history⁴, the Huangmei Opera has been welcomed by Chinese people around the world, as it is melodious and easy to remember. It also has a language advantage over the Cantonese Opera, as being sung in Mandarin, it can be understood by more people. Used in films, the opera attracts more attention than traditional dialogues by transferring flat narrative into pleasant tunes, such as the short and passionate songs in the 1964 *Mulan* movie. When *Mulan*’s father agrees his daughter to go to the army, he sings that, “if only a person can kill the enemy, do not mind whether it’s a girl or a boy; ...If only you (*Mulan*) can protect the country, I will take all the blame (for sending a girl to the front)”⁵. With the allegro accompaniment, his words show great intensity of feeling. The Second crucial element is the lyric, which always tells historical stories with uncontroversial subjects. Those stories, transmitted throughout China for centuries, reflect generations of people’s thirst for happiness. Adapted from them, films made in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Hong Kong continue the praise of human efforts to live a better life. *A Maid from Heaven* (1963) describes the mutual love between a goddess and a human in which they succeed in breaking the rules of the heaven and get married. *Lady General Hua Mulan* (1964) praises the filial piety to the parents and the love between family members. In short, the Huangmei Opera film takes full advantage of the traditional art form and effectively avoids the sharp social contrast at that time, which earns it great commercial and critical success.

Lady General Hua Mulan, being one of the representative works of the Huangmei Opera film, continues its tradition of uncontroversial themes with the intention to establish a kind of family order which asserts the maintenance of ancient virtues as well as the breaking of traditional limitations. Referring to its inherence of the ancient mores, the 1964 film is the quite faithful to the original story, both in theme and in film narration alike. The film focuses on the traditional moral regulations. Out of the filial piety to her father who is old and ill, *Mulan* cross-dresses to join the army. When she complains that her position as a guard of the military warehouse stops her from fighting against the enemies directly, she is told that the army is like a big family, in which everyone should love his (or her) job and fulfil the duty, as all positions are important for the overall situation. This idea resonates with the Confucius assertion that a gentleman should work hard without complaint and do not mind their ranks [4]. Revitalizing these old moral codes has much to do with the social development in Hong Kong in the first half of 1960s. The reconstruction after anti-Japanese war caused great changes of the surrounding conditions and the turmoil following it. In such a condition, many people began to be nostalgic for the past agricultural society. The dreamland with good family and social orders, which was formed in the 1964 movie, aimed to satisfy this kind of thirsty.

To break with the past was mainly shown by the young generation’s actions in the film. The heroine breaks the gender boundary by dressing like a man and fighting for the country. She also found her Mr. Right during the military life, which reflected her pursuit of the freedom of marriage. At this point, the film resonated with

²“The Hong Kong 1956 riots began with looting and attacks by Pro-Nationalist on Pro-Communist citizens and property in Hong Kong during October, 1956, and soon developed into large and violent riots”. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_1956_riots (accessed April 13th, 2007).

³“Large scale riots in Hong Kong, May 1967, were caused by pro-communist leftists in Hong Kong, inspired by the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), who turned a labour dispute into large scale demonstrations against British colonial rule”. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_1967_riots (accessed April 13th, 2007).

⁴According to Chinese scholar Wu Gongmin, the Huangmei Opera came into being in 1785 AD. Wu, Gongmin, (2007). “Tracking down the Sources of Huangmei Opera”, in *Art of Huangmei Opera*. Anqing: Anhui Cultural Bureau Press, 53.

⁵Translated by the author.

the *Love Eterne* (1963) which described a young couple's pursuit for freedom of marriage by breaking the ancient stranglehold on marriage. Both films were welcomed by the public partly because they reflected a typical feature of Hong Kong culture in the 1960s, that is, the development of youth culture. At that time, the first generation after war grew up. Influenced by both the prosperity of Marxism in mainland China and the Western culture, they were more rebellious than their predecessors. Along with the struggle against the "the conservative values and dreamy material life of traditional Chinese families" and the demonstration against the Vietnam War, the "youth problem" in Hong Kong came into being [5]. This trend, together with the nostalgic ideas, formed the cultural infightings of Hong Kong society in the 1960s.

Aiming at avoiding both the political and cultural conflicts existing in present life, *Lady General Hua Mulan* attempted to develop a rapport with both sides. That is, its praise of the traditional virtues satisfied people's nostalgic longing for the order and beauty of the past, while the mild rebellions against sexual discrimination and other kinds of social limitations were welcomed by the young generation. In doing so, the film served as a temporary escape from current life. Going into detail, since early 1960s, the family ties were not as close as before with more people spending most of their time in the factories. The emphasis of the filial piety and the close relationship between family members in the film were more like a memorial of the good old days, as in the past, family was the most important component of society. Furthermore, in the turmoil of the first half of 1960s, the Hong Kong residents did not have a clear idea of nation. On the one hand, they inherited the Chinese traditions; on the other, under the control of British government, they accepted more western regulations. In this condition, although the film mentioned patriotism, it could not be made clear whether it was a passion for China, the motherland, or for United Kingdom, the suzerain. The reflection of rebellion in the cinema was also idealised. The heroine did not break down the ancient regulations completely. Instead, she changed herself to fit for them, such as pretending to be a boy to avoid being against the military rules. Having reached the goal of protecting the country and her father, she went back to her old life as a common girl, without further rebellious movements.

In all, by reassuring the old morals which are useful to keep social orders, the film made up a fairyland of the ancient China, in which family members loved each other, elders cared for their followers, women were independent and men were reliable. The rebellious factors of the original text were described as the essential steps that were taken to break some old-fashioned limitations and to perfect the traditional society. With all these efforts, *Lady General Hua Mulan* blurred the hardships existing in the real social background and avoided the present conflicts.

3. Mulan, a Filial Girl

Lady General Hua Mulan was made in a comparatively peaceful environment. At that time, the social focus was not the war against invaders, but domestic issues. Therefore the director used the family theme of the film to express that the whole society was like a family, and if only all social members concern about others could they live a happy life. Decided by this theme, the protagonist was portrayed as a good daughter who pulls out all the stops to assure the happiness of her parents and herself. During this process, both her inheritance of the traditional virtues and her struggles against old limitations were asserted. That is, the director re-established the traditional orders of family by depicting the maintenance of good old traditions by the protagonist. Furthermore, he introduced Mulan's mild struggle against the old-fashioned limitations to perfect these orders for the taste of current viewers. Therefore shown in the film, Mulan got an image that is both traditional and modern, both obedient and rebellious.

Referring to the traditional and obedient side, Mulan is depicted as a filial daughter who pays little attention to personal achievements. According to the requirement for filial responsibilities stated by Confucius, "in looking after one's parents, one man may need to give very mild advice to them. If it is not accepted, one should remain respectful and obedient" [6]. The heroine obeys this rule. Shown in the film, when her suggestion for her going to the army in lieu of her father was refused, Mulan once thought about stealing the military decree but soon gives up, as that idea might hurt the elder people emotionally. Then she tried every means to obtain their whole-hearted permission and always kept her promise to them about concealing her real identity properly in the army in the following twelve years. Another plot showing her sincerity to her father and mother is that after the victory of the war, unlike others who stay at the front, Mulan, who merits the greatest prize, declines all kinds of rewards and goes back home concerned about her ailing parents. Here besides expressing filial piety, she followed Ban Zhao's assertion of women being modest saying that "a girl should not mention the good things she

has done” [7]. Therefore she put down the armour and weapon, and returned to be a common female who is busy weaving and embroidering all day long as they are regarded as the proper duties of females at that time.

Her modern and rebellious characteristics are mostly shown from two parts. First is the emphasis of her extraordinary ability and cleverness, which is against the tradition beliefs that “absence of talent in a woman is synonymous with virtue” [8], as women were supposed to be inferior to men by all means. Growing under such guidance, Mulan still learnt excellent fighting skills, which already made her stand out from her peers. What’s more, realizing that the main reason for her father to stop her from joining the army is the worry that the girl is too young to be a master of martial arts, a shortcoming that will leave her in danger on confronting the enemies, Mulan does not persuade him directly. Instead she shows her talents by pretending to be a boy and planning a competition with her father. Finally she won both the competition and his permission for her to go to the battlefield on which she proves her excellence of martial and cross-dressing skills and effectively allays her father’s anxieties. Moreover, when the Commander in Chief asks Mulan to marry his daughter, the heroine makes a good escape in excuse that her wound on the shoulder becomes painful again. In all these tough conditions, she performs some clever tricks to pull off as well as avoiding getting tough with others.

Secondly, her rebelliousness is figured by her pursuit for the freedom of love. The protagonist takes a shine to General Li when he helps her move the provision. Later her love for him accumulates with twelve-year concerted work. Just before returning home, she drops him a few hints about her real identity, even by saying unequivocally that “if I am a girl, I will marry you”. These movements and words are strictly forbidden by the ancient regulations since the West Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC), which requires that the match of the young people should be chosen by their parents with the help of the matchmakers [9]. As a matter of fact, the director also evokes the *Love Eterne* (1963) to enhance Mulan’s witty and rebellion, as Zhu Yingtai, the protagonist of that movie, is an established example as a clever girl who struggles to liberate herself from the yoke of the old regulations of marriage. By drawing a parallel between Yingtai and Mulan, the set piece of the heroine’s brave expression of love in the 1964 film figures her as a rebellious heroine. What should be pointed out is that these hints that she gives to her lover are the extreme that she has done with nothing beyond this limit. It’s not a complete break-down of traditional values, but a modest attempt to improve them. In so doing, the director re-establishes the traditional orders of family by depicting the maintenance of good old traditions by the protagonist together with her mild struggle against the old-fashioned limitations to perfect these orders to cater to the taste of viewers.

The family theme is also presented by the addition of Mulan’s cousin, Hua Ping, as the supporting role. On the one hand, Ping is also a filial child as Mulan is, who goes to the battle under the order of his mother. On the other, he also takes the responsibility of caring for the disguised girl by following her everywhere and pulling out all the stops to help her keep her secret during the whole military life, just like a safeguard. His actions fit for requirement of an ancient moral rule that “the elder brother should care about the young when father cannot” [10]. For example, he gives his bed to Mulan for several times when she cannot find a place to sleep in the military camp full of the opposite-sex soldiers. When the girl is badly wounded by the enemy and refuses to take off clothes for medical care, Ping comes to the idea of cutting open her sleeve to apply the medicine, a brilliant suggestion that saves her life and secret at the same time. His appearance in the plot increases more warmth of family to the cruel war.

Referring to the negative characters, the villains’ wisdom is also mentioned as a contrast with Mulan’s strategy. They are no longer merely killing machines with no brains, but military scientists who try to win the war with manoeuvres, such as launching a surprise attack. However, their secret movements are discovered by the heroine who has a good eye for details. With a comparison between them, these villains are used well as the foil to the heroine. That is, their failure in the war shows Mulan’s superiority over them in the using of military strategies—they were good, but she’s better. The enemies’ timidity is shown with their begging for living after realizing their likely failure on the battleground. That was also a great contrast to the protagonist’s bravery as she inclines to choose death for the country over surrender for personal survival. In short, the performance of the invaders helps perfect Mulan’s figure as an excellent soldier.

To conclude, the heroine in this filmic version is depicted as a filial girl with mild rebellious pursuits shown by her smartness and excellent personal skills together with her brave pursuit for love. Being filial, she follows the orders and suggestions given by her parents and tries her best to let them stay safe and feel at ease all the time. Being rebellious, she always improves herself with varied knowledge and martial skills and finally does a good job on the battlefield with successful disguise as a male soldier. Her attempt to express her love vaguely to

the ideal match doesn't go far beyond the limit of traditions and was treated as an anecdote about clever girls.

4. Identity Crisis: The Fundamental Reason

This part intends to discuss that both the nostalgia and rebellion shown in *Lady General Hua Mulan* were rooted in the identity crisis of the Hong Kong people in the 1960s. To make this clear, the first question to answer is: what is identity crisis? Erik Erikson, a developmental psychologist, came up with this concept and defined that “an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself” [11]. When people cannot have a clear definition of who they are, they will be anxious to search for a proper explanation. During such process, they may refer to their past, present and possible future life for answers. That's what the public do in Hong Kong in the 1960s. After more-than-one-hundred-year experience as “a Chinese society under British colonial control, Hong Kong had no national anthem before 1997” and it did not have any “official symbol to which the indigenous culture could anchor itself” [12]. Colonies are always full of different kinds of conflicts. Taking Hong Kong for example, Chinese citizens are very different from British rulers from appearance to living details, and cannot be easily accepted as a part of them either politically or culturally. While Mainland China, the origin of Chinese culture, is the place which local people cannot easily go back to for many social historical reasons. Such clear political and cultural conflicts lead to the lack of any unified local representatives which also shows the instability of locals' recognition of themselves.

The coming of refugees also influences the formation of unified local identity. After a series of wars against intruders and the following civil war, local population there increased sharply with pouring in of refugees from Mainland China. The first peak was after October 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established. Many nationalists took Hong Kong as the second choice of sanctuary after realizing that they were left behind by the Kuomintang of which these major leaders fled to Taiwan, as “the British colony offered a liberal community and an open market economy” [13], which makes it quite attractive. The second refugee wave happened during the three-year famine in mainland from 1959 to 1961, in which “some 30 million Chinese starved to death and births of about the same number were lost or postponed”, a terrible “man-made death” [14] labelled by Richard Rhodes. Many common people escaped to the British colony for survival needs. Those refugees who presented two thirds of the whole population in the 1950s and 1960s [15], had a deep feeling for their hometown but could not make it to go back then or in the recent future. At the same time, with the huge differences in language and cultural backgrounds from people who originally lived there, they were always outsiders of the main stream of Hong Kong society. In this condition, some film workers began to make movies that aimed to recollect the ties between Hong Kong and the Mainland as special medicine for their unavoidable homesickness.

The second generation of refugees mentioned above were born after war in Hong Kong and grew up in a more Westernized environment. They had lesser connections with the mainland than their parents. Besides, with local economy bouncing back from its previous funk during wartime, Hong Kong gradually became the centre of financial and professional services. While Mainland China was still haunted in the shadow of political mobilisation and campaigns like the Cultural Revolution and cannot spare much on economic development. Therefore as discussed by Chan Chi Kit, “substantial improvement in the standard of living and a significant change in the urban landscape in Hong Kong marked an interesting contrast with the economic backwardness found in the mainland” [16]. Both political instability and poor living conditions prevented local citizens to have any illusions for present China and pushed them to seek their own identity from the neighbourhood they were in. However, their attempt could hardly be fruitful, as at that time the British government intentionally ignored the development of social and historical identities in the colony. As pointed out by Eric Kit-wai Ma, “concerned primarily with sustaining economic and social order, the colonial administration sought to distance itself from identity politics” [17]. Under this policy, the youth could not establish an identity naturally and begun to use more fierce ways to pursue it. Their struggles formed the rebellion part of Hong Kong culture in the 1960s.

The Shao Brothers, the producer of *Lady General Hua Mulan*, who aims at the rejuvenation of Mandarin films, intends to form reconciliation between the ruling Western culture and Chinese cultural heritages. Such a heritage, like relicts of Confucianism, was just what was discarding by Mainland China during the Cultural Revolution. It was more like “an ethnic tie and racial identification, Hong Kong people somehow got along well with this cultural label even when they were under colonial rule” [18] and “‘Pan-Chineseness’ has played a significant role in Hong Kong identity, to which Chinese folklore and ethno-cultural ethos have been widely attributed by Hong Kong inhabitants” [19]. As shown in *Lady General Hua Mulan*, the historical opera and the ancient virtues are used to attract people to return into the framework of old traditions; while at the same time, the

introduction of the rebellion against ancient limitations shows the new generation's pursuit of personal development under Western influences. All together is to form a reconciled identity for the Hong Kong residents with the mixture of both Chinese and Western ideas. However, albeit its great box office and critical success, the film's assertion of the middle course is not practical in real life. The later social and political developments after 1967 shows that Hong Kong has made it to establish its own identity which is different from complete Chinese or Western ones. Anyway, the director' effort of making a Shangri-la of the traditions to deal with the identity crisis of people in Hong Kong is worth recording.

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