

Sexism, White-Washing Chinese Culture, And Stereotypes in Mainstream Media: Unveiling the Intersection and Solutions for Change

Yuyang Wu *

Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego, CA, USA

* Corresponding Author Email: wuyy96@gmail.com

Abstract. The study examines how the intersection of sexism and the white-washing of Chinese culture in mainstream media perpetuates harmful stereotypes, underrepresents the social status of Chinese women, and diminishes their self-perception and societal expectations. An analysis of *Mulan and other Disney movies*, reveals how the media misrepresent intersectional identities, reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes to a broad audience. The study highlights the need for genuine representation of marginalized groups to challenge these stereotypes and argues that increased awareness and inclusivity can reduce ingrained prejudices and correct misrepresentations. It contributes to ongoing discussions on intersectionality and the critical role of diversity in shaping public perceptions.

Keywords: Sexism; white-washing Chinese culture; stereotypes; media; intersectional; woman; race; underrepresentation; masculinity; self-esteem.

1. Introduction

The representation of *intersectionality* in mainstream media has become an increasingly important topic in modern society. Identity intersectionality refers to the interconnection and interdependence of *social categories*, including race, class, and gender, which affect individuals or groups. This concept recognizes that these categories overlap and create systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Throughout history, women, particularly those with intersectional identities, have been depicted in media in stereotypical ways and have been underrepresented. Likewise, the issue of *white-washing Chinese culture in mainstream media* has been a persistent problem, leading to harmful stereotypes that define Chinese people as exotic and unassimilable, perpetuating an inaccurate understanding of their culture and identity. How do sexism and white-washing Chinese culture intersect and perpetuate stereotypes in mainstream media and what are some ways to solve the problem? This study examines the perpetuation of sexist and white-washed stereotypes in popular media, exemplified in Disney's movies *Mulan*, which have negative consequences for the Chinese community and restrict the empowerment and representation of females. The research highlights the crucial need to embrace diverse representation and address misconceptions and prejudices. This is particularly important for audiences who are interested in gender and race studies, as well as individuals advocating for equality and cultural inclusion. The research aims to explore the challenges and experiences faced by individuals with intersectional identities in a society that emphasizes *masculinity* and *white supremacy*. Finally, it seeks to provide solutions for enhancing visibility in mainstream media.

2. Impact and Solutions

2.1. Exploring Sexism and White-Washing Chinese Culture in Media

Feminism, originating in France and gaining popularity in Britain and the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerged as a direct result of the feminist movement in Western countries. Simone Beauvoir, a French philosopher, championed feminist ideas in her book, *The Second Sex*, highlighting the historical societal marginalization of women and emphasizing the importance of women's economic independence [1]. Despite the early recognition of feminist

concepts, sexism remains deeply ingrained in contemporary society and takes various forms, including its manifestation in mainstream media. Sexism refers to prejudice and unequal treatment based on gender, leading to limitations in opportunities and the perpetuation of stereotypes. In the Disney movie *Mulan*, the empowerment of women is portrayed by highlighting the supportive role of male characters in Mulan's journey. Without adopting a male identity, Mulan would have been unable to join the battlefield and protect her family and nation. By assuming a male persona, Mulan gains a more influential position, allowing her to momentarily escape the constraints imposed on women and challenge traditional societal expectations. Through this transformation, Mulan transcends the limitations imposed by a feudal society and fights alongside men as equal individuals [2]. However, does a woman's value solely depend on conforming to societal expectations within male-dominated domains? Mulan reinforces the notion that a woman's self-worth and fulfillment are tied to assuming masculine attributes, as "it often conceals hypermasculine practices and male dominance in social contexts, presenting them as the norm" [3]. The film suggests that women can only attain personal value by adopting resilient and stoic behaviors akin to men, this somehow restricts the empowerment of women from being their true selves. This concept perpetuates the belief that women are inferior to men, going as far as to imply that women are mere extensions of men, as their shadows. Despite Simone Beauvoir's emphasis on women's autonomy in her discussion of feminism, their independence has not received proper recognition and has been subjected to limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. This phenomenon is not limited to film and media but extends to reality, where masculinity appears to serve as a benchmark for evaluating both men and women. However, women have various avenues to realize their self-worth, without conforming to the masculine ideal or competing in male-dominated fields. By presenting female values as competing for male resources within the male gaze space, the film *Mulan* sparks controversy. It fails to acknowledge the biological differences between men and women and oversimplifies the concept of self-worth, adopting a unisex approach that undermines the inherent value of women. Instead, society should embrace and appreciate the distinctive characteristics and qualities that women possess as a unique gender, rather than restricting them to predefined gender roles.

Likewise, Feminist criticism reveals that Disney films, starting from *Frozen*, appear to embody more progressive feminist ideals compared to earlier works like *Snow White*. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that these movies, including *Mulan* and *Frozen*, are ultimately carefully packaged cultural commodities driven by capitalist motives in society. "The advertising campaign aims to attract a wide audience of girls with the ultimate goal of encouraging children to personally identify with the characters so that they will purchase the associated products" [4]. Gendered targeting in advertising reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes by assuming that girls will naturally be attracted to the advertised characters and products. This raises concerns about how advertising can perpetuate societal norms and expectations related to gender, potentially restricting the range of interests and aspirations for girls. On top of this, the representation of women's rights in these films serves as a superficial attraction for audiences and a symbolic gesture to appeal to female viewers. The so-called "female awakening" depicted lacks social context, historical significance, logical coherence, and a clear cause-and-effect relationship. The female characters in these movies can be anyone, regardless of age, culture, or class, if they are women with desires. Through a mere song, these characters swiftly transform into queens, warriors, or accomplished individuals. One might argue that this portrayal is beneficial, as it shows young girls that success is attainable and isn't impossibly hard. However, it is important to inspire young girls with a realistic portrayal of success, avoiding the depiction of female characters easily achieving power without challenges, which can create false expectations and devalue genuine struggles. A nuanced portrayal empowers girls by highlighting the complexities of pursuing goals, overcoming obstacles, and emphasizing perseverance. Although feminism may not be overtly evident in Western fairy tales like *Frozen*, Disney's portrayal of Mulan demonstrates a lack of understanding of Eastern cultural nuances, indicating a shallow interpretation. Importantly, exporting one's values without regard for cultural differences and thorough research can be deemed an act of arrogance.

Disney's approach to appealing to an international market has led to the inclusion of Eastern princesses in their repertoire. However, the portrayal of these princesses raises concerns as they do not accurately and respectfully represent Eastern cultures, particularly Chinese culture. White-washing Chinese culture in media refers to distorting or altering aspects of Chinese culture to conform to Western or non-Chinese perspectives. The Chinese portrayal of Mulan depoliticizes her, primarily celebrating her morality and character. In contrast, the Western portrayal of Mulan is emphasizing political demands based mostly on the concept of equal rights and equality. In *Mulan*, the depiction of her physical appearance aligns with the typical image of a Chinese woman from history. However, when it comes to her behavior and demeanor, Mulan is portrayed as casual and unrestrained, with exaggerated expressions. For instance, before Mulan goes to take the matchmaker's test, she is shown anxiously looking around the courtyard, her eyes darting from side to side, furrowing her eyebrows, and displaying nervousness. During the tea ceremony, Mulan accidentally spills the tea on the matchmaker's clothes, resulting in a series of embarrassing moments [5]. This portrayal starkly contrasts with the historical image of Chinese women and leads to the lack of authenticity in the character. The film's portrayal of Mulan can be described as unorthodox and unconventional, as it appears to strive to showcase a diverse range of female characters while deviating from the gentle elegance and politeness often associated with Chinese women. This approach overlooks important cultural aspects and presents a distorted image that deviates from the historical context. While the film maintains the image of Mulan as a symbol of filial piety in traditional Chinese culture, it also imbues her with Westernized values. In other words, Disney, being in a strong position in global cultural communication, adapted *Mulan* to portray a combination of "American women" and "Chinese women in the minds of Westerners". However, this approach failed to please the Chinese audience and even perpetuated stereotypes held by the white community against Chinese communities.

Additionally, the misuse of symbols in Disney movies is ultimately the result of Western arrogance and prejudice against Chinese culture. This arrogance has led them to attempt to analyze Chinese culture through their narrow nationalistic lens, without truly understanding its depth. They fail to recognize the profoundness of Chinese culture, which cannot be encapsulated by a few symbols in a movie. An example of this is the use of "Qi" or "Chi" throughout the film. While not blatantly erroneous, it represents an overly superficial interpretation of Chinese culture. "From a Chinese perspective, qi is cultivated more within oneself through exercise than taken from others. The misuse of qi in *Mulan* hardly has anything to do with qi shows some misunderstanding of qi as well as in Chinese culture in general, making the story rather baffling for a Chinese audience while obfuscating the existence of qi among the non-Chinese audience" [6]. The movie does not provide any explanation of qi or deliberately maintains semantic ambiguity surrounding it. This is because the abundance of symbols and tasteless settings weaken Mulan's internal activities. Furthermore, Mulan's performance appears more like being led by the director, lacking autonomy. However, this particular instance is merely a small glimpse into the vast array of film and media portrayals. Presently, there is an abundance of movies that aim to depict Chinese culture, but unfortunately, even a popular film like *Kung Fu Panda* inaccurately portrays the concept of qi. These misleading representations in film and media play a significant role in fostering a widespread lack of understanding and misinterpretation of Chinese culture within the American market, affecting individuals across various age groups from teenagers to adults.

Furthermore, the intersection of sexism and the whitewashing of Chinese culture in the film perpetuates stereotypes. While some characters in the movie hail from Chinese culture, their portrayal deviates from the traditional norms and, in some cases, contradicts them altogether. This is evident in the character of Mulan's "witch" counterpart. "Mulan and Xianniang's qi, they seem to have inadvertently negated this positive development by setting up a dichotomy of "special" women versus "ordinary" women, wherein the latter happily assume their designated place within a patriarchal system" [7]. In other words, to challenge traditional expectations for women as wives and mothers, they must possess innate magical qi from birth. The name assigned to the character and her overall

persona align seamlessly with the Western perception of a witch. Within some Western cultures, the destiny of a witch is predetermined. Men are deemed as God's favored beings, setting the standard for all things, while women, considered incomplete individuals, are subjected to male dominance and domestication. Women who dared to challenge male authority or possessed extraordinary abilities that men did not were stigmatized as "witches" and subjected to persecution, often leading to a life of exile. During the Middle Ages in the West, numerous women were unjustly tried and banished as witches [8]. This evidence showcases the intersectional oppression of women, highlighting how they are marginalized and subjugated in a patriarchal society. This gender-specific oppression penalizes women who defy societal norms or exhibit independence. The witch character in *Mulan* draws directly from this Western cultural lineage, demonstrating her animosity towards the emperor and men while sympathizing with Mulan. Thus, despite the Eastern appearance of both the witch and Mulan, their connection to each other is also heavily influenced by Western ideals. This further exemplifies the white-washing effect prevalent in their relationship, diminishing its authenticity. Disney, in addition, attempts to blend Eastern cultural symbols into the Western narrative framework. This serves the purpose of catering to Westerners' fascination with Eastern culture and expanding the Eastern cultural market. As a result, Western viewers are increasingly developing a stereotypical view of traditional Eastern culture, exemplified by the portrayal of the mysterious witch archetype in Chinese settings. Overall, the intersectional analysis demonstrates that the film sustains gender-based oppression and reinforces cultural stereotypes by depicting characters and blending cultural elements in a way that perpetuates these issues.

2.1.1 Constraining Empowerment and Representation of Females

The media's neglect of women's distinct qualities and values, along with its tendency to equate their achievements with those of men, hampers the empowerment and representation of female characters. This reinforcement of traditional gender roles is evident in the portrayal of prince and princess characters, perpetuating stereotypical masculine and feminine traits. The concept portrayed in not only *Mulan*, but also other Disney movies showcase women in a supportive role to males within a male-dominated society. This portrayal has the potential to shape females, especially from a young age, with a blurred sense of self-identity and discourages them from expressing themselves, as well as promotes dependency. For example, "the introduction of the Disney Princess line in 2001 capitalized on its popularity, particularly among young girls, leading to a redefined notion of "girlhood" within the mainstream culture" [9]. This indicates that society has widely accepted and normalized the portrayal of female characters who may display dependence and limited self-expression. Likewise, the conceptualization of gender-oriented merchandise confines the perception of young girls of themselves. This interconnectedness between production, consumer culture, and popular culture reinforces limited and stereotypical perceptions of girlhood. The influence of the Disney Princess line on consumer culture is evident through the wide range of available products and the significant growth in Disney's marketing sales, notably impacting the behavior of young girls. As a result of these factors, individuals find themselves continuously striving to conform to a feminine aesthetic, unable to liberate themselves from the limitations imposed by societal norms. Additionally, the media consistently presents narratives where a prince comes to the rescue of a princess, reinforcing the notion that the princess is reliant on the prince. These princesses still face constraints and ultimately prioritize romantic relationships or sacrifice personal aspirations for others, suggesting that traditional gender roles persist despite some progress being made. "Watching television was found to be a predictor of embracing traditional social scripts in romantic relationships, particularly evident in Disney Princess films. Other studies have also provided evidence that individuals' dating and flirting behaviors are influenced by their social scripts and perception of societal norms" [10]. This biased portrayal contributes to the yearning and unrealistic fantasies among adult women, who aspire to experience fairy-tale-like romantic relationships and eagerly await their prince charming to come and save them. As a result, the media's representation perpetuates a cycle of expectations and desires that may hinder women's agency, perpetuating traditional gender roles, while women's own behavior and thinking, in certain circumstances, further reinforce the social phenomenon of patriarchy,

positioning men in a superior stance. However, women's value should not be contingent on replicating or relying on male resources and abilities. Women have their own unique qualities, and their values should align with those specific traits. Unfortunately, the media often overlooks the differences between men and women. This leads to an excessive focus on women's value orientation and an attempt to equate their accomplishments with those of men, perpetuating stereotypical ideas of gender equality. Women have multiple avenues to attain self-esteem, and they are not required to encroach upon traditionally male-dominated spheres as a means of demonstrating their worth.

2.1.2 Impact on the Chinese community from their young age

Disney has leveraged the global reach of its pop culture symbols to subliminally solidify the images from many of its films in the minds of the audience. The white-washing of Chinese culture in media perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces a Western-centric viewpoint, distorts cultural practices, and has a significant impact on both the audience's perception and the affected culture's people. In the eyes of the Western world, China is often perceived as mysterious, treacherous, and magical, leading to the inclusion of the "witch" in *Mulan* and the ritual moment in *Turning Red*. However, Disney's attempt to portray their imaginative concept of Chinese magic falls short due to the fragmented and disorganized presentation of fantasy elements in media. This not only distorts the culture but also perpetuates the perception of mysterious and weird stereotypes to the audience, ultimately fostering an exclusionary attitude towards the Chinese community. The extensive representation of Chinese individuals in the mainstream media of the United States, particularly in Disney movies, fails to acknowledge the unique and varied characteristics of Chinese communities. This portrayal perpetuates the misconception that all Chinese people share identical traits as well as creates difficulties for second-generation Chinese adolescents in recognizing and embracing their cultural heritage. These stereotypes, along with cultural disorientation, discrimination, and limited media representation, contribute to mental health issues and academic obstacles experienced by Chinese American teenagers [11]. Moreover, Discrimination and exclusion in the surrounding environment significantly impact the development of adolescents, leading to heightened feelings of alienation from the American community. A strong ethnic identity plays a crucial role in the psychological growth of adolescents. As they become more self-aware and gain a deeper understanding of different perspectives, they become capable of recognizing discrimination. Consequently, their identity becomes highly vulnerable to transformation due to external messages that evaluate their sense of self [12]. Therefore, Disney's use of popular cultural symbols has covertly reinforced stereotypes and hindered the recognition of Chinese cultural heritage, resulting in exclusionary attitudes, mental health challenges, and academic obstacles for Chinese American teenagers facing discrimination and limited media representation.

2.2. Solutions

The intersection of sexism and white-washing Chinese culture in mainstream media perpetuates harmful stereotypes. To address this issue, it is imperative to adopt comprehensive solutions that tackle both aspects simultaneously, leaving no room for complacency. One avenue of promise lies in harnessing the power of social media, a dynamic platform capable of amplifying voices and raising awareness about marginalized communities. By steadfastly emphasizing the imperative to reject stereotypes and fostering a genuine understanding of diverse cultures, we can challenge the long-standing biases, prejudices, and discrimination that continue to plague these communities [13]. By acknowledging and valuing these differences, society can foster a more inclusive and balanced understanding of female empowerment, allowing women to explore diverse paths and avenues that align with their own identities and aspirations. This approach respects the principles of nature and affirms the inherent value of women themselves. Moreover, it is paramount to proactively involve marginalized groups, including the Chinese and other non-white cultures, in the creative process [14]. Seeking guidance from cultural experts and ensuring their meaningful participation will pave the way for authentic and respectful portrayals that defy stereotypes, foster cultural empathy, and contribute to a much-needed transformation of the media landscape. Finally, fostering greater interactions has

the potential to decrease implicit stereotypes and prejudices towards marginalized communities, particularly the Chinese community [15]. These strategies play a crucial role in dismantling the intertwined effects of sexism and the distortion of Chinese culture, ultimately fostering positive transformation in mainstream media.

2.3. Acknowledgement and Responses

This study sheds light on the limitations inherent in exploring gender and racial stereotypes within mainstream media. First, by concentrating exclusively on the portrayal of these stereotypes within Disney movies, it may not encompass the broader challenges faced by other companies in addressing race and gender in their films and other media. Second, the presence of bias in a movie may reflect the opinions of an individual or a few people, resulting in a constrained message that may include misleading information. However, movies are a medium that caters to a wide audience with diverse backgrounds and understandings. The impact of such biases could be detrimental as they could influence people's comprehension of certain concepts. The impact of biases in movies is not limited to the audience alone but could also affect individuals like me who write about these concepts. For instance, certain scenes in the movie *Mulan* may portray a misunderstanding of Chinese culture, which could be a direct result of the producer's personal biases. Such biases may mislead me as a writer into believing that all Western cultures think and perceive things similarly. Recognizing the impact of biases is crucial as they can spread misinformation and misrepresentations of cultures, hindering the goal of promoting diversity and inclusivity in media. Hence, researchers must acknowledge the limitations of sources and approach the subject with an open and critical mind.

3. Summary

The issues of the intersection of sexism, white-washing Chinese culture, and perpetuating stereotypes in mainstream media demand our critical attention. Disney films like *Mulan* highlight how these problems hinder the empowerment and representation of female characters while distorting Chinese culture. Traditional gender roles and Western-centric perspectives further erode the authenticity of women and Chinese culture. To overcome these challenges, we must implement comprehensive solutions. By addressing the intersection of these issues, raising awareness, challenging biases, and promoting genuine representation, we can create a more inclusive and empowering media environment.

References

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2010.
- [2] Manaworapong, Pimpitchanok, and Neil Evan Jon Anthony Bowen. "Language, Gender, and Patriarchy in *Mulan*: A Diachronic Analysis of a Disney Princess Movie." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2020, pp. 375-390.
- [3] Wang, Caroline Yiqian. "The Reimagined Princess, The Empowered Female Warrior." 2022 International Conference on International Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities (CISOC 2022). Atlantis Press, 2022.
- [4] England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles*, vol. 64, no. 7-8, 2011, pp. 555-567.
- [5] Al-Yasin, Noor, and Ghaleb Rabab'ah. "Female Disney Characters' Linguistic Features in the 1990's." *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages and Literatures* Vol 13.1 (2021): 121-142.
- [6] Zheng, Yutong. *Rethinking qi and Tai Chi through New Media Technologies*. Diss. OCAD University, 2021.
- [7] Manaworapong, Pimpitchanok, and Neil Evan Jon Anthony Bowen. "Language, Gender, and Patriarchy in *Mulan*: A Diachronic Analysis of a Disney Princess Movie." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2020, pp. 375-390.

- [8] De Lis, Iris S. "Witches as Queer (ed) Comrades: How Patriarchy, Sexism and Religious Fanaticism Fueled the Early Modern European Witch Hunts." (2021).
- [9] England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles*, vol. 64, no. 7-8, 2011, pp. 555-567.
- [10] England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles*, vol. 64, no. 7-8, 2011, pp. 555-567.
- [11] Gu, Amy. "Causes of Cultural Identity Confusion and Mental Health Stressors of Chinese American Adolescents: 'Model Minority' Stereotype, Family Value Conflicts, Peer Discrimination, And Low Levels of Media Representation."
- [12] Gu, Amy. "Causes of Cultural Identity Confusion and Mental Health Stressors of Chinese American Adolescents: 'Model Minority' Stereotype, Family Value Conflicts, Peer Discrimination, And Low Levels of Media Representation."
- [13] Laemle, Jessica L. "Trapped in the Mouse House: How Disney has Portrayed Racism and Sexism in its Princess Films." *Undergraduate Journal of Gettysburg College*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 57-66.
- [14] Bayar, Hazal. "Turning Red: Tradition, Repression, Mommy Issues, and a Millennial Way of Growing Up." *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2022, article 2.
- [15] Williamson, Scott, et al. "Family Matters: How Immigrant Histories Can Promote Inclusion." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 115, no. 2, 2021, pp. 686-693.