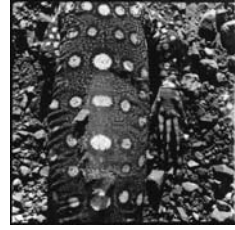


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## Globalization and hybridization in cultural products

### The cases of *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

● Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh

*Hong Kong Baptist University*

**ABSTRACT** ● Hybridization has become part of an ongoing trend in cultural production, with both the globalization and localization of the culture industry. Hybridization, however, is not merely the mixing, blending and synthesizing of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole. In the course of hybridization, cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another. This study looks at two globally popular films that were adapted from Chinese works, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Mulan*, as examples to illustrate the complexity involved in hybridization and the implications that it has for the debate on the globalization of culture. It was found that ‘deculturalization’, ‘acculturalization’ and ‘reculturalization’ can be used to characterize the hybridization of cultural products and that often the producer, with his/her background, aspirations and work style, has a key role to play in deciding how these features are organized and manifested. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● acculturalization ● *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* ● deculturalization ● globalization ● hybridization ● *Mulan* ● reculturalization

### Hybridity, hybridization and global culture

Globalization has been seen as a process, but also a project; a reality, but also a belief (Mattelart, 2002). There is continuing debate over its onset, definition and end result. Many believe that a global culture will emerge with the rise of globalization. Yet opinions are divided over what the nature of this culture will be, whether it will be a single homogeneous system that is characterized by convergence and the presence of the 'universal' in the 'particular' (Wallerstein, 1990) or whether it will be an ensemble of 'particulars' that features long-distance interconnectedness (Hannerz, 1996). With the rise of postcolonialism, the concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) has become a new facet of the debate about global culture in the social sciences.

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, opens up what he calls 'a third space' within which elements encounter and transform each other (Papastergiadis, 2000: 170; Young, 1995). It is, at the same time, the site of struggle and resistance against imperialist powers (Kraidy, 2002: 316). With the goal of abolishing the distinctions between center and periphery, and other forms of binarism, this postcolonial interpretation of cultural change is a significant departure from the linear diffusion model of 'the West to the rest'. It directly challenges the idea of essentialism, according to Pieterse (1995: 64), because it unsettles the introverted concept of culture, a concept that underlies ideologies such as romantic nationalism, racism and cultural essentialism. It helps to release us from the boundaries of nation, community, ethnicity or class, while presenting a 'kaleidoscope of collective experience in motion'.

In the globalization debate, hybridization presents yet another scenario for the outcome of cultural globalization besides hegemonic westernization and postmodern diversity. The concept of hybridization, however, falls short of acknowledging structural inequalities and has allegedly become a neocolonial discourse that is complicit with transnational capitalism (Dirlik, 1997; Friedman, 2000: 3; Kraidy, 2002). Another, perhaps more fundamental, weakness of the concept of hybridity lies with its intellectual power. The histories of the hybridization of metropolitan cultures, as Pieterse (1995: 64) indicates, show that hybridization, with its downturns and upswings, its go slows and its turns of speed, has been taking place all along. Moreover, hybridization is not a feature that is unique only to certain societies; the creolizing spectrum, as Hannerz points out, extends from the first world metropolis to the third world village (Hannerz, 1987: 555). Hybridity, therefore, is the 'ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation', as Rosaldo (1995: xv) concludes. In this sense, hybridization is a tautology, and globalization has brought about nothing more than the hybridization of hybrid cultures.

The paucity of communications research on this topic indicates the

ontological and political quandaries that are inherent in using the concept as an analytical device (Kraidy, 2002: 317). Nowhere can we find more convincing and abundant evidence for the hybridization of the hybrid than in cultural products, as imitation, borrowing, appropriation, extraction, mutual learning and representation erode all possibilities for cultural authenticity. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Baz Luhrmann, director of the Hollywood film *Moulin Rouge*, admitted that the idea to combine high comedy, high tragedy and song and dance in that film was deeply influenced by popular Hindi (or Bollywood) films (Shome and Hegde, 2002: 184). Bollywood films, in turn, draw on mythological epics, classical, folk and modern theater, music video and Hollywood for inspiration and, thus, are hybrids in themselves (Ciecko, 2001: 125). To those in the business of cultural production, boundaries and restrictions serve to stifle, rather than enhance, creativity.

The issue here is not one of finding evidence for hybridization or the equally visible structural imbalances involved, but how hybridization takes place and what it produces: do the globalized production practices in the cultural industries indeed accomplish little more than the hybridization of hybrid cultures as the literature implied – the further mixing, blending and synthesizing that ultimately leads to a homogeneous faceless global culture?

This study seeks to discover the strategies that may be involved in bringing about hybridized products, the contingencies in which hybridization takes place, the ways in which it has been achieved and the new cultural forms that may be generated due to the complex array of factors involved. As pointed out by Chan and Ma (2002: 4), we are experiencing a ‘give and take’ among cultures that encounter each other, a multifaceted and complex working of forces. However, nagging questions remain about who has given and taken what, what has been the result of such give and take within the existing industrial framework and what the implications of the answers to these questions are for the cultural globalization debate.

### **Deculturalization, acculturation and reculturalization**

As cable and satellite television mushroomed in the 1990s, the demand for films and television programs grew twentyfold and more. This demand has led to the localization of global products and the globalization of local products on an unprecedented scale. This phenomenon allows producers to borrow ideas to enlighten an established story model or to make content adjustments to cater to the needs of a different audience, but it also creates a need to adapt, repackage or transform an existing product to make it more appealing to different viewer groups.

In meeting the needs and tastes of different viewer groups – or simply as a reflection of the way production is organized today – a set of content

design strategies has emerged that removes, incorporates, transforms or redefines elements that relate either to a specific geographical location, time, social, political and economic setting or to cultural values and practices.

Lee (2003) uses the term 'delocalization' to describe the minimization of local elements to create content that is 'least objectionable' to a larger, more diversified audience, both in form (i.e. dubbing) and content, and the term 'relocalization' to describe the incorporation of local elements into transnational products. The same concepts can be utilized to describe the globalization of local products and the localization of global products.

For films such as *Mulan*, the meaning of 'local' is expanded from covering the spatial to encompassing a combination of the spatial *and* the temporal, or, more precisely, it takes on a cultural denotation. Through a process of deculturalization, all of the elements that are culture specific, including those that are ethnic, historical or religious, that create barriers to intercultural reception or are deemed unfit for a new presentation style, may be contained in a familiar narrative pattern that not only plays down cultural differences, but also guarantees comprehension across viewer groups. The result is the emergence of a new breed of films and television programs – the 'acculturalized' cultural product.

In analyzing the presence of Japanese cultural products in Asia, Iwabuchi (2002: 257, 2000) notes that one of the major reasons for their popularity is a lack of 'Japaneseness', the fact that 'they do not invoke images of Japan, and thus of Japanese cultural presence'. A Japanese term, *Mu-kokuseki*, is used to refer to something or someone that lacks any nationality and the 'erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics and any context which would embed the characters in a particular culture or country'. This feature not only characterizes Japanese animation, but also other Japanese products such as karaoke, computer games, comics or televised singing contests. In place of traditional icons such as the kimono dress, bon dance and sumo wrestling, Japanese cultural products now feature cute cartoon characters with big round eyes and girls with knee-high socks. This 'cultural odorlessness', which now gives Japanese cultural exports an effective competitive edge, is itself a product of American domination in the 1950s and the early part of 1960s, according to Iwabuchi (2002: 260).

American television programs and most Hollywood blockbusters have long been accused of following a universal formula that enables them to cross cultural barriers and capture a transnational market – the same cultural facelessness as is found in Japanese products. They typically present a fantasy world of romance and adventure (Wang, 2001). Constructed with dazzling visual and audio effects and easily comprehensible story lines, these fantasy worlds are full of dangers that rarely fail to hold the undivided attention of viewers, regardless of age, gender, ethnic, religious, social and cultural differences.

Although deculturalization may be the key to entering the global market,

its 'acultural' outlook may in fact be deceptive, as storytelling cannot be accomplished without touching on beliefs, attitudes, values and behavioral patterns. When characters are pushed into action and decisions are made, the underlying beliefs and values emerge. It does not take a careful viewer to notice that in the cultural blender of Hollywood blockbusters, superheroes, space fighters, young adventurers and even the charming princes of the animal kingdom are depicted as high achievers who, rising from below, play the roles of guardians of freedom, equality and peace. Reculturalization, therefore, is often as symbiotic with deculturalization as it is with acculturalization.

### A tale of two hybrid films

In 2001, a Chinese-language martial arts film became the then highest grossing foreign language film ever made (Lahr, 2003: 72) in the history of Hollywood.<sup>1</sup> The film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, has almost every ingredient needed to make it 'authentically' Chinese. Adapted from a novel published in China in the early 1930s, it features a romantic martial arts story that is set in ancient China. The 'Chineseness' of the film is also characterized by dazzling sword fights, period costumes, an iconic Chinese setting and an all-Chinese cast who speak Mandarin throughout the film. However, one aspect of the film production sets it apart from other Chinese martial arts films; it was made with an eye on the market beyond Greater China, was financed through international presale, bonds and bank loans and was distributed by a transnational distributor.<sup>2</sup> Despite the attacks that the film has received from critics, its market success in repackaging an ethnic story for a global audience manifests two closely linked characteristics of cultural production today; namely, the indispensable role of the capitalist mechanism in financing, marketing and distribution and the emergence of cultural fusion and hybridization as a prevailing strategy for transnational content design.

Strictly speaking, *Crouching Tiger* is not the first film of its kind to feature a specific Chinese location, characters, actions and narrative motifs. Chinese stories or historical backgrounds are nothing new in Hollywood. Hollywood's interest in Chinese themes or motifs began in the second decade of the 20th century. Many of the films that employ such themes have been criticized either for enhancing the stereotypes of China under western imperialism or for recreating what Edward Said calls 'an Oriental fantasy'. However, this has not stopped Hollywood from appropriating Chinese stories or from utilizing a Chinese setting. *Mulan* is the most prominent example in recent history of Hollywood borrowing oriental narratives and repackaging them as global blockbusters. In contrast to *Crouching Tiger*, a Chinese-owned, Chinese-made art film also targeting the global market,

*Mulan* is a distinctly Hollywood film with a clear corporate product differentiation for global consumption. Despite the Chinese origin of its story, as a Disney animation picture, *Mulan* is a global product par excellence.<sup>3</sup> Its transformation of a Chinese folk tale into a global box office success testifies to the spiral process of hybridization. *Crouching Tiger* and *Mulan* thus represent two different kinds of hybridization in the current mediascape of global cultural flow. One employs a 'glocal' strategy of incorporating transnational financing models and the aesthetics of arthouse cinema into the making of a seemingly local story; the other usurps a story of foreign origin and assimilates it into the gigantic Disney pantheon. Both are hybridized entertainment products, but they display different approaches to the process of mixing and matching distinct cultural and social elements. In the following, we employ the terms deculturalization, acculturalization and reculturalization to describe and analyze the many faces of hybridization. In telling the stories of two hybrids, we provide an analysis of how globalization and hybridization are woven into the texture of contemporary media entertainment. *Mulan* is a familiar version of hybridity through capitalist (Caucasian) co-optation of ethnic material, while *Crouching Tiger* is a reverse hybridity through cultural convergence.

### **The Chinese heroine and American multiculturalism: deculturalization, reculturalization and acculturalization**

The *Mulan* story is based on a popular ballad written during the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 AD) about a legendary 14-year-old girl Mulan who, as a filial daughter, volunteers to join the army, by hiding her gender, in her father's place. Mulan miraculously survives the 10-year war against the invaders and fights so well that she is decorated by the emperor. However, she declines the emperor's offer of a high appointment in order to return home to her parents. The story, which features Mulan as a role model, is one of the 10 most popular folk tales in China and exemplifies both filial piety and patriotism. It has been adapted into operas, television series and at least two films in China prior to the Disney production. The Chinese star Michelle Yeoh adapted it again into a martial arts picture called *Hua Mulan*, with special effects and location shooting in China.

Compared with the Chinese story in its various forms, significant changes have been introduced into the Disney rendition, whereas the previous Chinese film adaptations are relatively unadulterated. What should be noted here are the strategies employed by Disney to transform a Chinese legend into a modern entertaining product with a cultural distinction or flavor. The entertainment commodity, true to the Disney brand, contains a kernel of American-style individualism in the context of ethnic and gender assertion. This is in contradiction to the ideology of the Chinese source material.

Mulan is introduced in the Disney film by a series of comic gags that are built on misunderstandings and bickering, which are typical of early Disney cartoons such as *Silly Symphonies* (1927). This is contrary to the way in which Mulan is introduced in the original Chinese story. The Chinese ballad begins with Mulan retiring to the traditional woman's place at the loom and contemplating ways in which to help her family. Whereas the Chinese story characterizes Mulan as a quiet and thoughtful girl in the domestic sphere, who attends to duties such as weaving, the Disney Mulan is sprightly, tomboyish and unfit to be an ideal wife. This major difference represents the familiar dichotomy between old China and the modern West. Whereas the Chinese story immediately proceeds to Mulan's course of action as a filial daughter, Disney's Mulan spectacularly fails her bridal test. Dejected, she begins to have doubts about herself. The opportunity for redemption comes when the war breaks out. She wants to prove to her family and herself that she can bring the family honor, not by marriage, but by taking on the male duty of fighting a war. Therefore, we have a major shift from the Chinese cultural trait of filial piety to the pursuit of a sense of selfhood.

In order to animate a Chinese story that was unfamiliar to the rest of the world, at least two processes of cultural hybridization were involved. The first has to do with the blending of cultural iconography and the sounds of ancient China, complete with pagodas, willow trees, flowing robes and classical Chinese music. These Chinese cultural icons may simply be used instrumentally to ensure a facade of otherness. In the second process, the Disney *Mulan* signifies Hollywood's packaging of a multiculturalism that glorifies the multiplicity of culture, ethnicity, nation, gender and race. Consider the various voices that dub the main characters of the film: African American Eddie Murphy for the mini-dragon Mushu; Chinese American Ming-na Wen for Mulan; B.D. Wong for Mulan's commanding officer General Li Shang; James Hong for Mulan's fellow soldier Chi Fu; and a number of Japanese American, Korean American and Jewish actors in the supporting roles.

It is apparent that the Disney version of *Mulan* wishes to present itself as a multicultural film for a wider demographic that is inclusive of white, Jewish, African and Asian Americans. To do this, Disney plays with several extant stereotypes of Asian Americans and their culture. The name Mushu immediately brings to mind ethnic food, Mushu pork being a popular Chinese takeout food in America. Hence, Mushu is a highly recognizable ethnic-comic type that calls to mind various generic conventions. What is more interesting in Disney's typecasting of Mushu is the choice of Eddie Murphy as vocal artist for the mini-dragon, who is known for playing swaggering wisecracking characters in mainstream American comedy action films. In *Mulan*, Mushu is a runt and an underdog, a good-for-nothing dragon who is trying to earn his stripes. This makes him a good parallel to Mulan herself, as at the beginning of the film she is also a good-for-nothing

daughter: the song including the line ‘you’ll bring honor to us all’ is highly ironic given her tomboy inclinations.

Both Mulan and Mushu prevail through imposture and guile, while managing to hold on to their real characters. The ‘message’ of the film implies, and the song ‘Be True to Your Heart’ at the end explicitly states, that proof of authenticity does not come from one’s social role, but from who one is inside and the need to stick to that. In the end, Mulan manages to meet her father’s expectations and restores the family honor and, as is typical of Disney heroines (Wasko, 2001: 116), finds her prince charming. Such have-it-all endings can only be possible in the popular imagination, but not in practice, as in Chinese feudal societies, family honor has never been the business of daughters. The values that the film endorses are not simply those of family love or even individual freedom, but specifically the true value of authenticity, of the recognition of one’s identity and the celebration of the triumph of will and the victory of the underdog. These values are all too familiar in Hollywood blockbusters (Wang, 2001).

Thus, the story, although set in ancient China, is resolutely modern and American, wherein the dark past of the ‘other’ is represented by two minor but annoying characters, the matchmaker and the prime minister. One is a fussy gatekeeper of traditional femininity and the other is an officious mean-spirited bureaucrat who cares only about the rules. Through the obese, meticulous and rigid caricature of the matchmaker, the film criticizes the view that the role of women is limited only to that of the virtuous wife. The prime minister is characterized as a tiny, physically unfit meddler, whose only priority is to make sure that the rules will be followed. Together, they encapsulate the old outmoded traditions and practices of feudal China and everything that the modern Disney *Mulan* is up against.

With the Confucian doctrines of loyalty, filial piety and ideal femininity represented as ancient, if not primitive, ideologies, the introduction of gender equality and contemporary concepts of femininity, and the erasure of the gender bending that is specific to Chinese theatre, the Mulan story was remade into a timeless legend aimed at Disney’s family audience, which celebrates universal acultural values of love, courage and independence.<sup>4</sup> Even the history of conflicts between the Chinese and the so-called barbarians of the north is depicted as a type of medieval warfare that could occur at any time and in any place in human history.

### **Pathways to the crossover market: cultural negotiations in global cultural production**

What the Disney producers have done to the Chinese ballad of *Mulan* is far from unprecedented. Similar to the disappearance of filial piety and loyalty from the Disney *Mulan*, the issue of social hierarchy, which is central to the



novel of *Crouching Tiger*, was sidestepped in the film version. Like *Mulan*, *Crouching Tiger* is a romantic martial arts story that centers on a young girl's struggle towards self-discovery. The hidden dragon of the title refers to the sensational martial arts of Jiaolong (or Jen), which remain under wraps due to her proper background as the daughter of an imperial official. Jen's secret passion is the *jianghu* or outlaw demimonde of banditry and bodyguards. Like *Mulan*, she has a double life; her martial arts are practiced to serve dark anarchic purposes. Unlike her mentor Jade Fox, she is not a villain, but a supremely gifted prodigy in need of guidance. Her martial arts need to be honed, turned into the virtues of justice and benevolence that are represented by her good mentors Yu Xiulian and Li Mubai. Here we find the central problem of the deculturalization process because Jen's domestication in a properly arranged marriage is sidelined in favor of the struggle for control of her martial arts.

Compatibility of rank and social hierarchy was probably the main consideration regarding all marriages in feudal China. Given the supreme importance of social hierarchies, the sexual encounters between Jen, the high-born mistress of a noble family, and her bandit lover Lo (Tiger) would have been unthinkable and were, therefore, very carefully staged in Wang Dulu's novel. First, there is the removal of hostility when Lo, the charismatic bandit leader, rescues Jen from imminent death in the desert while dutifully keeping a physical distance from her, as is required of a gentleman. Second, there is the removal of hierarchical distance when Lo confides his family tragedy to her, implying that he was not low born and possibly had quite a respectable background that was compatible with hers. Finally, there is the removal of personal distance when Jen, in an act of self-defense, unintentionally aggravates Lo's injuries. His pain and agony trigger her sympathy and she turns to help, an act that eventually sets off love and passion. In the film's treatment of their romantic encounter, however, subtlety and decorum are replaced by libido and passion. When James Schamus was asked to rewrite one love scene between Jen and Lo in a romantic way with a modern sensibility, he added starry skies, falling stars, a desert and solitude to the screenplay (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 298–9). With solitude setting the two free from their social bondage, this backdrop prompts the disappearance of personal distance and justifies the explosion of passion. This sequence leaves out crucial information about Lo's background, which is the key to Jen's change of attitude towards Lo from animosity to sympathy. Instead, Ang Lee emphasizes Jen's willful and intuitive propensity that leads her to live through impetuous emotion rather than rationality.

In the novel, the issue of social compatibility continuously haunts Jen. Wang Dulu repeatedly describes Jen's inner deliberations on this problem and emphasizes the contradictions between her choices and her true feelings. In the film, however, Jen is depicted as a relatively flat character

devoid of any psychological dimension. This major difference may explain the change of emphasis that Lee makes at the end of the film. The end of the novel begins with a mysterious plan that Jen has carefully set up. The plan turns out to be the staging of her own suicide so that she can be reunited with her lover Lo. However, the story does not end with their elopement; instead, Jen disappears by herself after a romantic night with Lo (Wang, 1985, Vol. 2: 756–74).

The stark contrast of social strata is the key to the suspension of a love relationship between Jen and Lo in the novel. Because of the irreversible hierarchical boundary between the two ill-fated lovers, Jen decides to leave Lo in the end. However, this essential obstacle that prevents a happy ending is greatly played down in the film. The film ends with the death of Jen's two masters, which is not indicated in the novel.

Social stratum was not the only factor that caused Ang Lee and his writers to make adjustments to the ending of the film in contrast to the source material. The alterations were also due to the perception that popular Chinese fiction is old fashioned, and the film attempts to revive it with the forms and patterns of international art cinema. According to Ang Lee, several features of Chinese martial arts fiction and films are considered incomprehensible and antiquated. One of these is authors' compulsive discussion and exposition of the motivations of the characters and cause-effect relationships. For instance, Wang Dulu adds an expository coda that is addressed directly to readers explaining how and why Jen must choose to leave Lo in the end (Yeh and Davis, 2005). To readers who are unfamiliar with this crude convention in Chinese martial arts fiction, this is problematic because it assumes that readers lack the ability to surmise the story and must be told explicitly of the twists and turns in the plot arrangement. This type of literary trope also featured heavily in the popular films that are derived from the martial arts tradition, including many both low-budget and major films of the 1960s and 1970s. It might have been an acceptable practice in the past with a predominantly Chinese audience, but it probably would not work for a transcultural film that is intended for a contemporary niche audience across cultural and national boundaries.

For this reason, Lee and his writers had to strip away this practice that was embedded in the source material. The film must not come to an end with a closure, either narratively or ideologically, and so Lee stages what looks like a suicide, or a redemption, by allowing Jen to throw herself off the Wudan mountain, which is known as a Taoist pure land. Such an ending gives rise to several possible interpretations. In searching for the final meaning of *Crouching Tiger*, the audience is given the opportunity and space for playful hermeneutics.

Another major example of reculturalization is the language of the film. The dialogue of this film is a hybrid and underwent various rounds of translation, retranslation, writing and rewriting. The multilayered writing

comprises the work of Chinese-language scriptwriters Wang Hui-ling and Tsai Kuo-jong, Ang Lee's own translation, James Schamus's rewrite and overwrite, Lee's rewrite and colloquial expressions, literary language, classical, provincial and western and Chinese language (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 297). This mixed hybrid language is not unproblematic and has attracted criticism. For Ang Lee, the antiquity of the historical setting and the linguistic particularity of classical Chinese that is embedded in the story needed translation to contemporize an old text. Yet, to critics in Taiwan and mainland China, Lo's love talk sounds too modern, largely as a result of the period inaccuracy of his language.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of Lee's efforts to make a Chinese film that is globally accessible comes from the translation. 'When we did the subtitling . . . we translated in a way to allow Western audiences access, finding equivalences to likely speech and syntax patterns in a Western context' (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 304–5). This was a daunting problem because the English titles are not at all the same as the spoken dialogue and it was like writing a whole new script.

Doubling pairs of characters and organizing them into binaries – middle-aged versus young, reserve versus passion, traditional versus modern, reflective versus impetuous – also serve to make the theme of the film comprehensible to global audiences. These binary themes are connected with the ideologies of individualism, obligation to society and to family, and hierarchical and social norms. They point towards Lee's use of a formula (see Thompson, 1999) to create the clarity of value judgment that is a requirement of a global media commodity. They also point to Lee's recreation of a modern martial art stage from old materials through the mixing of West and East, art and marketplace. The strategies of mixing, synthesizing and hybridizing East and West may be similar in the making of both *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger*, but they were employed for quite different aims and entailed quite different outcomes.

### Contingencies of hybridization

The background of the two production teams reveals interesting common features that may explain the similarities in the measures that were adopted to achieve cultural hybridization. First, both teams had already accumulated significant experience in producing for the global market when they launched the film project. Although Ang Lee's team does not carry a transnational brand name like the Disney team, nor can it afford a production scale that is comparable to any Disney production, it does enjoy an international reputation that has helped it to acquire funding through international presale, bonds and bank loans. Second, both teams comprise members of different cultures who ensure the multivalence of the product,

and both teams went through rounds of debate and negotiation before the final product was hammered out. In the last stages, both teams managed the postproduction tasks through an international division of labor, and both films were marketed and distributed through transnational corporate networks with a global market reach.

The similarities, however, stop here. Ang Lee, being a diasporic Chinese, has attempted to instill a specific cultural significance in *Crouching Tiger* that no member of the Disney team would be interested in. According to his autobiography, Lee saw *Crouching Tiger* as the embodiment of a dream: to prove to the world that martial arts stories can be made with a sense of artistic beauty. He also wanted to accomplish the mission of presenting a quality product to the world audience and to 'bring glory to Chinese films' (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 421). The creation, to him, reflects who he is, what he knows about, identifies with, and the influences that he has been exposed to, including his Chinese cultural upbringing and western film education. To Lee, *Crouching Tiger* reflects his dual citizenship as a renowned filmmaker and it also signifies the meeting point of an old art form from his homeland and the new cultural technology he has acquired from his host country (Klein, 2004).

*Crouching Tiger* represents Ang Lee's conception of ancient China and his vision of Chinese art and ethics. As a homage to earlier Chinese art directors such as King Hu, the martial arts in the film are presented as a synthesis of Peking opera, kung fu and the Taoist worldview. Moreover, the narrative of the story does not strictly follow that of the classical Hollywood formula. In Ang Lee's view, Chinese drama is built on the release of tension from suppression, which is contrary to western drama, which feeds on the escalation of tension (Lahr, 2003). These features explain why Ang Lee stood firm when *Crouching Tiger* was charged with 'westernization' and of presenting a silent Taoist image of China – a longstanding stereotype – to attract western viewers. Lee did not deny having had foreign viewers in mind when making the film, but to him this did not mean that *Crouching Tiger* was just another Hollywood film.

It does not take many more examples to show that the mission that Ang Lee loaded onto *Crouching Tiger* is a rare exception in an industry that is ruled by capitalist logic and transnational corporations that link a global network. As critics (Dirlik, 1994: 349; Miller et al., 2001) point out, these transnationals hold the key to the current imbalanced market structure by forming business alliances, achieving vertical and horizontal integration and buying out reproduction rights from independent and local producers. Yet, within this tightly controlled business world, the possibilities of raising funds through presale, credit insurance and bank loans and of film distribution through contract arrangements with transnationals have opened up opportunities for a limited number of independent producers with established credentials and creative ideas. Ang Lee confided in his autobiography

that the autonomy that he has enjoyed in filmmaking comes with the back-up of overseas investment and global distribution (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 257) and it is this autonomy that has allowed him the chance to realize his childhood dreams.

This autonomy, however, does not translate into total freedom for filmmakers. Unbeknownst to Lee, both the source of investment for the film and his dream of 'proving to *the world*' have made it impossible not to 'deculturalize' the original *Crouching Tiger* story and the tradition of martial arts filmmaking. The clash of ideas and different practices became evident in the production process, which was a painstaking dialogue and negotiation between cultures, old and new, East and West. It reached a climax at the scriptwriting stage, when the narration of the story unfolded. In his autobiography, Lee admitted that the Chinese social structure was one of the first obstacles that he encountered in communicating with James Schamus, his longtime partner and one of two scriptwriters on the film. 'What draws viewers to a different culture is curiosity', Lee said. Once their curiosity is aroused comes comprehensiveness. 'There is not much more to mutual understanding than logic and reason, and the reference framework that is constructed on the basis of common sense.' As Lee admits, 'beyond these, crossing cultural barriers would become difficult' (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 287).

To an outsider, there are things about other cultures that are insensible, illogical or unreasonable and yet are accepted without question as habits or traditions by the members of that culture. To solve the problem, cultural elements that were deemed to be beyond common sense to Schamus were compromised. Given his cultural background and expertise, Schamus, in this case, did not stand for one person, but for mainstream values and a predominantly cosmopolitan worldview. In an interview, Schamus admitted that he began to understand 'how central the idea of the book is to the genre, and . . . to the culture as a whole' during the process of rewriting the script (Teo, 2001). Yet, it does not alter the fact that the Chinese team relied on Schamus to sensitize its members with regard to what would be considered absurd or interesting from a western perspective, pointing to the parts in the original work that should be omitted or elaborated, an exercise that was described by Lee as 'frustrating', yet 'useful' (Zhang and Lee, 2002: 292).

### **Globalization and hybridization: a third space? A third possibility?**

In his more recent work, Homi Bhabha has extended his notion of hybridity to include forms of counter-authority, a 'third space' that intervenes to affect

the hybrid moment of political change. Here the transformation value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One (unitary working class) nor the Other (the politics of gender), but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both. (Young, 1995: 23)

Hybridity, in this sense, involves the generation of new ways in which to understand and to generate possible new cultures. The birth of a 'third space', therefore, requires a process of dialectic discourse and reflective interaction through which ideas, values, and meaning clash and are negotiated and regenerated. Without this element, hybridity is not much more than a simple mixing and hybridizing to include forms that blend different elements.

In practice, however, hybridity in cultural production is not always achieved through dialectic discourse among cultures, whether in an effort to globalize or to localize. Under the capitalist maxim of minimizing cost and maximizing profit, hybridization is all too frequently reduced to hasty, cosmetic and even casual incorporations of different nominal elements. The localization of transnational text, for example, often involves no more than using local actors and actresses in transnational advertisements, local hosts and players in licensed televised game shows or, as is seen in some obscure soap operas, local names for cities and characters. Hybridity in these products, whether initiated by transnationals or local producers, may be common, yet has remained at the superficial level where the 'mainstream', as defined by market size, permeates and prevails. As some have warned, localized products are not local products; they are essentially global.

To go beyond this superficial level of hybridization, deculturalization and reculturalization become necessary. Deculturalization, as witnessed in *Crouching Tiger*, is key to ensuring comprehension and acceptance by a global audience, as much as Lee would like to claim the Chineseness of *Crouching Tiger*. In *Crouching Tiger*, it was necessary to remove (or play down) cultural values such as filial piety or social hierarchy, despite the autonomy of the filmmaker and his cultural background and aspirations, because the film was targeted at the global market. What causes the difference in the type of hybridity that comes out of the process of transformation is the kind of reculturalization strategy that the filmmaker seeks to adopt and the objectives that the film is expected to achieve.

For Disney's *Mulan*, no cultural mission or personal vision was involved in producing the film. Tony Bancroft, *Mulan*'s co-director, admitted that there were limitations to how Chinese the film would be: 'We knew we had to respect the material . . . [but] we also knew we weren't going to make a Chinese picture. We couldn't. . . . We are not Chinese.' In addition, Disney has already established a production model for its films, which has 'a different sensibility, a different storytelling style' (Chan, 2002: 237).

Disney's middle-of-the-road approach to *Mulan* and the occasional deviation from Disney's favorite formula were therefore ways in which to show 'respect' for the original legend, a courtesy gesture that does not alter the fact that *Mulan* represents the transculturalization of an ethnic story by a transnational giant.<sup>5</sup> To Disney managers, neither cost nor cultural literacy was a real problem, yet cultural fusion that goes beyond the level of their winning formula was deemed unnecessary in terms of corporate profit. The 'authentic' outlook of the film gave the repackaging of the formula a fresh and exotic appearance, but it was also important not to completely usurp the original context within which the story takes place, given the importance of the Chinese market. The level of hybridity achieved in these products, therefore, is instrumental in nature and is no different from the hybridity that is found in most transnational advertisements or localized television serial dramas.

Looking at the way in which Disney has built its animation kingdom through the adaptation of popular fairy tales and folk stories such as *Aladdin* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, it can be seen that Tony Bancroft was merely following a Disney tradition that was established by Walt Disney himself. After deconstructing the process of cross-cultural refiguration in *The Three Caballeros*, a Disney cartoon released in 1945, Burton-Carvajal (1994: 147) noted the sincerity in Disney's quest for ethnic originality. Yet, to him, all these good intentions served but one purpose: to mask the evidence hidden behind the comic frenzy and the 'authentic' cultural appearance that 'no cultural reciprocities are created equal'.

The difference between Ang Lee and Tony Bancroft is therefore not just that of a brand name independent producer/director versus a generic transnational executive, but is the difference in aim – of the realization of a cultural mission and the production of another box office hit.

But to those who are concerned about the issue of cultural authenticity, the question is whether the difference in aim has led to a difference in outcome. While Ang Lee saw the necessity to deconstruct the stereotypes of Chinese culture, cinema and language in order to make *Crouching Tiger* a modern *Chinese* film, the critics noticed the removal of traditional values, the change in presentation style and, hence, the lack of Chineseness.

In response to the above criticism, Schamus suggested a different interpretation of orientalism that suggests that it lies as much in the perception of what one *is* from the perspective of the colonizers as in the perception of what one is *not* from the perspective of the colonizers. Schamus claimed that *Crouching Tiger* was criticized for failing to be authentically Chinese or Asian because the idea that one can attain expertise in different cultural realms and feed it back into one's own culture is essentially a western idea and prerogative (Teo, 2001). Others (non-westeners) are expected to stay faithful to their genres and to cultivate authenticity, much like 'a panda in a zoo', as Ang Lee put it. A Chinese product that has excluded certain

Chinese cultural attributes and incorporated western elements, from this perspective, is considered a 'fake' and the result of 'cultural bastardization'.

This point touches on an important issue that has largely been overlooked in the literature; namely, the nature and characteristics of hybridized products other than their exhibition of features of the parent cultures. Many, including Schamus himself (Pong, 2002; Teo, 2001; Wei, 2003), attributed the success of *Crouching Tiger* in the western market to that which is identified as being eastern in the film and the success (or failure) in Asia to that which is identified as being western in the film. The focus of attention was readily placed on the question of the film's 'Chineseness' or 'easternness', yet there was less interest in seeing, if not a reluctance to see, the film in its own right. What can a cultural product be if it is 'neither here nor there'? To label a cultural product 'fake', 'in disguise' or 'authentic' presumes the existence of a standard prototype that simply does not exist.

The case of *Crouching Tiger* implies that modern cinema should not, and perhaps cannot, be restricted to national and aesthetic boundaries because filmmaking appropriates anything that the producers are able to create. It is no longer a secret that a great majority of the historical films and soap operas that fill movie theaters and television channels in Greater China have also been 'deculturalized'. Female characters no longer subject themselves to the tyranny of patriarchal rules, commoners casually play jokes on emperors and children fight with their parents. The Chineseness of these cultural products lies in their ability to identify with and attract viewers in contemporary Chinese societies, themselves the product of constant change and hybridization, rather than in a faithful reflection of stereotypical images of feudal China.

We are reminded by Ulf Hannerz that cultures are by nature fluid and are always in motion as the result of continuing interaction both from within the culture itself and with the outside world. Both Bakhtin and Levi-Strauss noted, each from their own perspective, that all cultures are hybrids (Werbner, 1997). It is also important to note that the constant motion and incorporation of different elements bring with them new characteristics, new distinctions and new similarities. From this perspective, perhaps hybridization and globalization do lead to the loss of cultural distinctiveness in cultural products – and in cultures as well. However, by losing what was there, we are presented with something new, something unique, something that represents yet another culture. It is only when we lose sight of the dynamic nature of culture and lock ourselves into a quest for cultural essentialism that the hybridization of cultural products will necessarily lead to stale homogeneity.



## Notes

- 1 This record has been broken by yet another high-grossing foreign language film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).
- 2 International presale is a method for filmmakers to raise funds through the sale of broadcasting rights before shooting begins. It was introduced to the US in the 1980s by the Italian producer de Laurentis (Wasser, 1995: 430).
- 3 Although its revenues are dwarfed by the dazzling global successes of blockbuster series, *Mulan* grossed US\$303,500,000 and was ranked 66th in the 2004 top-100 list of all-time worldwide box office successes: (<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Theater/3540/topworld.htm>). It is also one of Disney's 10 most profitable films. *Crouching Tiger* was originally targeted at art theaters outside of the Greater China region, but with a box office total of US\$213,200,000 and numerous international awards, including the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, it became the most successful 'non-American film' made.
- 4 By gender bending, we refer to standard practices in Chinese opera such as cross-dressing in all-male troupes in Peking opera and women's troupes in regional opera.
- 5 The Disney formula, according to Chan (2002), includes the following: good prevailing over evil, emotional catchy songs, cute animal sidekicks for comic relief, young romance, funny in-jokes, an assorted supporting cast with a grumpy-to-dopey personality range and character voices performed by film stars.

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● **GEORGETTE WANG** is chair professor and dean of the school of communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. She has published widely in the fields of new media, culture, communication and globalization. Her major publications include *The New Communication Landscape: Demystifying Media Globalization* (Routledge, 2000; edited with J. Servaes and A. Goonasekera), *Information Society: A Retrospective View* (with H.S. Dordick) and *Treading Different Paths: Informatization in Asia*. Address: School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong. [email: telgw@hkbu.edu.hk] ●

● **EMILIE YUEH-YU YEH** is associate director of the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies and associate professor of film studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. She is the co-author of *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* (Columbia University Press, 2005) and co-editor of *Chinese-language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Hawaii University Press, 2005). She is currently completing a book on the East Asian screen industry for the British Film Institute. Address: David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong. [email: yyyeh@hkbu.edu.hk] ●