

Translators, Patrons, and Audiences: Three Modes of Performative Reading of the English Animated Film *Mulan*

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Abstract: From the perspective of J. Miller's theory of "performative reading," the meaning of Disney's animated film *Mulan*, an intersemiotic translation of the Northern Dynasties folk poem *The Ballad of Mulan*, does not end with the production of the film, but rather continues to generate through the constant performative reading of it. Translators carry out "framing performativity", determining the film's topic and meaning and "re-presenting" their translation process. The patron, the Walt Disney Company, enacts "instrumentalizing performativity." Via the processes of symbolization and commercialization, it translates *Mulan* into a commodified node of its cultural economy. Audiences carry out "negotiating performativity." Through the appreciation and critique, they continuously expand the meaning of the film, and distinct forms of cultural subjectivity are shown among Chinese and Western viewers. As these forms of reading both compensate for and generate cultural meanings, there still exists a potential capacity for an authentic cross-cultural dialogue. The interaction structure is mainly one-way, which calls for a more reciprocal mechanism of reading.

Keywords: Translators; Patrons; Audiences; *Mulan*; Performative reading

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1. Introduction

American literary theorist J. Hillis Miller's theory of performativity brings literature into speech act theory. Miller stresses that reading literature is not merely a passive reception of meaning but rather a performative act with practical consequences. Readers are not simply responding to the author's intention but might perform speech acts of their own that profoundly intervene in social and cultural reality. In recent years, this view has sparked what has been called the "performative turn"^[1] and the "practice turn" of literary criticism in the West^[2].

Starting from this standpoint, we understand the spread of the English animated film *Mulan* as an example of performative reading. As an intersemiotic translation of a Northern Dynasties' folksong, *The*

Ballad of Mulan, the meaning of the film is read over and over by various readers, such as translators, the patron company Disney, audiences, etc., and creates complex effects in the real world. This paper analyses how these readers read *Mulan* performatively, as well as considers the possibilities and limits of reading as a cross-cultural practice.

2. Theoretical framework: The performativity of literary reading

The analysis of *Mulan* in this paper is grounded in Miller's theory of the performativity of literary reading. Miller argues that performativity operates not only in literary writing but also in reading. This perspective helps analyze different reading forms of *Mulan*.

Miller argues that literary production and reading are not language games disconnected from real life, but acts with real performative force. He carries J. L. Austin's speech act theory further by extending the study of the everyday utterance to literary language. In Austin's speech act theory, language is not only constative but also performative. People do not only "say something," but "do something" with language and obtain concrete effects. Yet, Austin confines his studies of performative utterance to everyday situations, and supposes that literary language is "void" because they are not authentic to the speaker's intention ^[3,4]. Miller contests the theory of intention analysis. He holds that, as a result of unconscious, or other intentionless states, the meaning and effect of an utterance cannot be reduced to the speaker's intention ^[5]. Once it is spoken, language breaks loose from its context and has performative power all on its own. Hence, literary language is also performative ^[6]. The analysis of a work cannot be limited to explaining what the author intended, but should concern itself more with the dynamics of meaning in its reading.

More specifically, performative reading involves both faithful revival of the "other" summoned by the text, and production of fresh performative acts through interpretation. To begin with, "fictional" texts do not remain dead and fated to rest on the page. Through active reading, they come alive. "Validity of the fictional act in the old text is measured by the reader's own living horizon" ^[5]. In answering the "other" invoked by the text, readers spring to life that which would otherwise be abstract, absent, and "purely linguistic." The "fictional" language is also given "real-life force" when excitement is induced, perceptions are altered, and so is behavior. Beyond such "faithful" reading, readers contribute new speech acts. Whether faithful and creative readings are of value. As Miller indicates, the value of reading is in its divergence from the text it reads" ^[7]. Alongside faithful reading, readers reproduce their reading into new kinds of writing: teaching, criticism, personal notes, and so on, which trigger new speech acts ^[6]. By citation and circulation, class lectures and reviews of articles can, in their turn, have a wide social and political impact.

Viewed from the angle of performative reading, the study of *Mulan* can be limited to studying the intentions of the team that adapts it. But it should also study how meaning is produced dynamically in reading, and what effects it has. Accordingly, we examine the performativity of the readings of *Mulan* by different actors and the cultural effect of the readings in this paper.

3. Framing performativity: Translators' shaping of cultural meaning

During the production and release of *Mulan*, the translators are first to carry out what we call "framing performativity". Through documentary films and interviews in public media, the translators provide an understanding framework to audiences by "re-presenting" the cultural translation process. Their interpretation

is not only the backstage footage but also another performance enhancing audiences' identification with the film and shapes audiences' subsequent interpretation.

The team's articulation of translational motivation framed the film's cultural meaning. During the promotion and staging of the film, the translators repeatedly used public media to "re-present" their motives. For example, in the special DVD edition of *Mulan*, the producers acknowledged that the movie is based on *The Ballad of Mulan*. However, they also remarked that while they passed along Mulan's spirit of sacrifice from the poem, throughout its production, they always stuck to the guiding thought of "To thine own self be true" ^[8] in Shakespeare. This Shakespeare line lets them express Mulan's filial piety and recast it. The original meaning of filial piety and loyalty in the Chinese poem is recast as fidelity to the "self", especially from a sense of female self and resisting external interference. Director Tony Bancroft also remarked that *Mulan* was ahead of its time for praising female power, and Mulan is one of the earliest powerful female heroes ^[9]. These accounts are explicitly responding to the original poem text that the film adapts. While the fundamental plotline of Mulan joining the army to save her father was maintained, the film strengthens the conflict between her own desire and traditional female social standards. For example, traditional cultural elements such as the *Admonitions for Women* are included in the film. We can see that the translators' reading is self-justifying. By telling their adaptation strategy, they announce and enlighten the theme of the film, guide the audience to understand the film's idea, and attempt to justify the film's revision of the source text.

Both translators show their commitment to the film and help to create cultural authority for it. The special edition DVD reviews the way the team culturally "translated" Chinese elements ^[8]. In order to create an authentic "Chinese" aesthetic, the team invested heavily in the production of the film. The team did extensive research. An art team consisting of more than thirty members studied Chinese ink painting to create a particular kind of visual aesthetic. The design of Mulan's figure was based on the curved lines of Chinese painting. And in an uncovered version of the film, a carefully crafted shadow-puppet opening sequence was contained. And the field trip to China helps to show China's folk culture. The scenes in which the army returns to see the emperor, for instance, show a panoramic picture of a traditional Chinese festive gathering. To make the scene, the team visited the Great Wall and the landscapes of Guilin. On the one hand, the revealing of all those details makes for a "re-presentation" of the translators' creative intentions, that is, as a "faithful" reading of the translated film. On the other hand, it is also a strategic performative act that aims at gaining audience trust. By showing that the film, although a Hollywood production, is, nevertheless, made based on a close reading of Chinese culture, the translators aim at justifying the cross-cultural mediation in the film.

The translators' performative reading thus directly informs the audience's reception. At the first level, the explanations provided by them help to make up for the cultural meanings lost in watching. Cultural references hidden in fast-changing visual images are hard to perceive or understand completely, so the comments of translators make them clear. Without the help of the team, audiences might find it hard to comprehend the underlying cultural references. For instance, they might simply overlook the fact that watercolor-style backgrounds were a cultural reference from the landscapes of Guilin, traditional Chinese ink painting. At the same time, describing the difficult work involved in cultural translation increases the audience's identification. Towards the late twentieth century in the USA, accessing Chinese cultural materials was far less available, and a film such as this with cultural details like this would indeed require great effort. Respect for cultural differences in the film can also assist in winning the audience's affection.

For this reason, the translators' performative reading is not a catalogue of accounts of production details, but an active process of framing and garnering trust. By "re-presenting" their motivation and creative process, they justify the film's cultural adaptation and prepare for other receptions. As will be seen in the following, this reading is further received by other reading agents. It is shown that translators' interviews become an important resource for reading the film.

4. Instrumentalizing performativity: Patron's commodification of Mulan

"Instrumentalizing performativity" is the work of the film's "patron", the Walt Disney Company, which transforms Mulan from a story character into a consumer commodity. The patron is the entity that limits translation ideologically, economically, and symbolically ^[10] and hence plays a very particular role of power. Unlike translators, who "re-present" in words the process of translation, the patron embeds "Princess Mulan" in the Walt Disney "Princess" series.

Disney's reading first comes in the refiguration of Mulan as a 'princess'. At the beginning of the 21st century, Disney's consumer products division started the Disney Princess brand, resulting in thousands of products related to it, such as books, movies, games, and daily commodities. In 2013, the Disney princesses franchise pulled in \$3 billion in annual revenue ^[11]. In this world, Mulan is the eighth princess and the only non-royal one. On the official website, her slogan, 'Be True to Yourself', signifies Mulan as an image of 'blossoming in adversity', meaning self-confidence, defiance of tradition, and self-certification ^[12]. Like other princesses, Disney has brought out a variety of products on Mulan, such as DVDs, books, dolls, costumes, accessories, and more. Mulan was also popularized in theme parks. From California to Hong Kong, visitors can enjoy live acting and physical performance reproductions of scenes and props in the film. Through this performing process, Mulan, first "translated" by the translators to stand for the self and sacrifice, is reinscribed into the princess image, by authenticity and resilience mainly. The "reading" of the patron thus includes an effect of symbol transformation and the reproduction of goods and cultural "consumption".

This reading shows a complex logic mixing both "negotiation" and "violence." On the one hand, the patron conducted a negotiated translation of the translator's interpretation. The official website of Princess Mulan clearly echoes the translators' guiding principle, "To thine own self be true." It integrates the rule-breaking and self-realizing female model into the princess network. On the other hand, this process also has violent features. In product designs, image promotion, and live performances, Mulan's public exposure is significantly lower than that of other princesses. Even when she does appear, her image often undergoes "princessification." In the film or the original poem, Mulan often shows up in armor or simple clothing, indifferent to appearance. But in services and products, she is rarely shown in armor. In performances, she often appears in ornate versions of Chinese Hanfu, with elaborate hairstyles and accessories, and even more elaborate than the outfit she wears meeting the matchmaker in the film ^[13,14]. Andy Mooney, then chairman of Disney Consumer Products, explained the commercial logic behind this strategy: the Princess brand aims to "give girls what they want." The goal of the brand is to imagine a little girl's room and how she might realize her princess fantasy. If she owns three or four princess items, then you run a great brand ^[13]. In this logic, the image of a cross-dressing, unadorned female warrior is excluded by the commercial imagination of a children's "princess."

However, despite its rewriting of the original versions, the patron's reading produces significant effects. Through merchandise, theme park performances, and public events, the figure of Mulan gains exposure

aside from the original text and film. She is continually reintroduced to the public and becomes even more renowned and long-lived. Meanwhile, the commercial value of the Princess franchise provides a financial basis for later adaptations of the film, including the 2004 sequel and the 2020 live-action film. In this sense, although the patron's "violent" translation diverges from both the translators' intentions and the original poem, it enables the symbol of Mulan to circulate more across media, generations, and regions.

In short, the patron's performative reading works by embedding Princess Mulan in a commercial system. In Disney's reading, both "negotiating" and "violent" translations exist. Disney establishes Mulan's global recognizability as a princess and invests further in film adaptations, while simultaneously obscuring her original cultural identities and depth.

5. Negotiating performativity: Audience cultural critique and creation

Audiences enact a form of "negotiating performativity" by generating cultural meanings through online interactions. Both Chinese and Western audiences compensate and create cultural meaning by turning their individual viewing experiences into online comments. Among them, Chinese audiences often emphasize questions of fidelity, while Western audiences focus on gender politics. However, the potential for cultural communication is largely confined within separate linguistic communities.

Among Chinese audiences, reading is largely centered on critiques of the film's cultural "fidelity," showing a strong sense of cultural subjectivity. Viewers evaluate aspects such as character design, artistic style, humor, subtitling, and dubbing. However, compared with Western audiences, Chinese viewers focus intensely on cultural representation. On the Chinese review platform Douban, highly liked comments indicate a special sensitivity to how Mulan's story and Chinese cultural elements are portrayed. A viewer is unsatisfied with the film's adaptation: "I've always felt that only Chinese people can truly capture the essence of Chinese culture..." This comment received over 1,200 likes. Another, which got 827 likes, writes, "When it comes to Chinese themes, foreigners just cannot fully understand our culture" ^[15]. At the same time, other viewers acknowledged the film's adaptation while praising its cultural depiction. A long review with over 900 likes titled "When Disney Meets Fa Mulan" adopts a more sympathetic view of the translators' hard work. It suggests that although the filmmakers used a Chinese story to promote "American culture," they conducted extensive research and traveled widely across China. "They really did their homework," and "they included everything they could think of except Peking opera. This deliberate effort makes them lovable" ^[15]. Another review with over 1100 likes appreciates the film's imagination of classical China: "A classical China shaped by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment... That is the dream this film offers us. I truly wish I could see this dream come true" ^[15]. Such responses clearly go beyond a purely "faithful" reading of the film. Rather, they constitute an ongoing negotiation of "fidelity" and "loyalty" in the translation of Chinese culture. Obviously, Chinese audience readings reflect their position as "bearers" of the source culture and show distinct cultural subjectivity.

By contrast, English-speaking audiences tend to focus more on gender politics and artistic expression. Their priorities are quite different from those of Chinese viewers. On Letterboxd, a platform similar to Douban, nearly 2.3 million users had marked *Mulan* as "watched" on December 1, 2025. Among those with more than 2000 likes, reviews frequently explore feminist and queer themes related to the main characters. One reviewer humorously used wordplay to suggest an implicit LGBTQ+ dimension to the male lead, Li Shang, and received 7603 likes. Another similar comment received 5011 likes ^[16]. A review praising the

film's portrayal of female power received 6972 likes. Other highly rated comments briefly praised the film's songs and voice acting. On Rotten Tomatoes, over 250000 users, both professional critics and common viewers, have rated the film. Professional critics tend to praise its feminist advancement in Disney narratives, as well as its visual style, attention to detail, and depiction of war and action scenes. General audiences comment on voice acting, music, themes of selfhood and gender, the design of Chinese settings, and the film's contribution to introducing multiple aspects of Chinese culture ^[17].

It is shown that although English reviews also engage with questions of cultural representation, they concentrate more on feminist and queer interpretation. This shows how audiences, through creative interpretation, generate new meanings that exceed the translators' original framework.

Within their communities, audience readings perform functions of both cultural "compensation" and "creation." To start with, reviews from diverse perspectives compensate for some cultural background information that might be lost. Comments on cultural, aesthetic, and technical factors make up for the message lost across intersemiotic, interlingual, and intralingual translation processes. While the original *The Ballad of Mulan* emphasizes filial piety, the film foregrounds female self-realization. While the poem minimizes heroism in war, the film amplifies Mulan's personal achievements in her military life. In response to these shifts, Chinese audiences' cultural critiques effectively activate aspects of the original poetic context that are downplayed in the film. They keep issues of fidelity and cultural omission visible in public.

What's more, both Chinese and Western audiences creatively expand the film's message. There are general approvals, detailed critiques of the translators' cultural sincerity, discussions of gender identity on platforms like Letterboxd and Rotten Tomatoes, and lively debates about cultural imagination on Douban. It becomes clear that the meaning of a translated work is never fully fixed or controlled by its creators. Audience reception is not the endpoint of meaning. It is the starting point for further "translation."

However, the effect of the cultural compensation and creation generated by the reviews is still limited within separate communities. In terms of the relationship among different types of agents, the audience often cites the interpretation of the translators and the patron. For example, some audiences mentioned translators' field trips to confirm their cultural attitude, or discussed Mulan's identity as a Disney princess. Yet this process is largely one-directional: the utterances of translators and the patron flow downward into audience communities; yet in the opposite direction, little meaningful feedback or absorption can be found.

In terms of the relationship among audiences, direct engagement between Chinese and Western communities is rare. Although interaction within each community is highly active through rating, commenting, liking, and discussion, there is little direct engagement between Chinese and Western audiences. Indeed, occasioned media coverage of this sort, such as that by Deseret News, injects a Chinese perspective into the English-speaking audience ^[18], but such cross-community "translation" remains occasional. The effect of cultural compensation and creating is often left in the fold of their own communities separately and parted by a linguistic and cultural distance.

Overall, the interaction structure of the audience's reading is "vertical flow and horizontal segmentation". Remarks from the translators and the patron reach the audience, but the words of the audience hardly ever make the upward vertical flow or flow across communities. When more mediating agents are introduced, such as cross-cultural platforms, it may bring about more reciprocal interactions and further realize the potential of cross-cultural communication.

In short, Chinese and Western audiences read *Mulan* with different concerns. The cultural compensation

and creation effect of their readings are only able to reach full potential through the advancement of more efficacious channels across communities. Because audiences generate meaning and speak out in their own communities, the performative aspect of their readings is constrained. They respond to translators and their patrons, but receive no response; they resonate in their community and search for no wider communication. The cross-cultural potential of audience reading thus has not only a message-making potential, but also relies on more reciprocal mechanisms of cross-community exchange.

6. Conclusion

By means of J. Hillis Miller's speech act theory of literature, this paper takes a performative reading of Disney's animated film *Mulan* as its object of study. It concludes that there are three ways of performative reading that are different in nature but related to each other. The translators make framing performativity; they represent their ways of making the film to establish the film's theme and cultural meaning. Instrumentalizing performativity is done by the patron, the Walt Disney Company, which turns *Mulan* into a mark of global cultural consumption. Negotiating performativity is done by the audience; they compensate each other with their cultural background and build up new cultural messages. Chinese viewers concentrate more on the question of cultural authenticity; the English-speaking audience works out feminist and queer interpretation. Each community shows its own cultural subjectivity.

Although the readings of these different actors all perform an important function of cultural compensation and production, their effects are asymmetrical. Words from the translator or the patron dominate meaning production. Words of the audience rarely rise upward. Meanwhile, a meaningful dialogue between communities of Chinese and Western audiences is also limited. Insights built up in each community are also trapped by linguistic boundaries. Therefore, the production of meaning by means of translation does not end with the creation or the loyal reception of the work, but performs meaning-creation activity by various performing actions of different readers. Meanwhile, the cross-cultural impact of reading practices also depends not only on the capability of cultural compensation and production, but also on the circulation of meanings. So, in order to realize the cross-cultural impact of translation, on the one hand, strong platforms for performing reading are needed; on the other hand, active channels for crossing community circulation are required.

Disclosure statement

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