



Regendered *Mulan*: Navigating Gender Identities in Chinese Subtitling and Dubbing

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of Audio-visual Translation (AVT) in portraying gender roles and cultural narratives in films, particularly in the context of feminist themes. Focusing on Disney's *Mulan*, the research compares Chinese subtitles and dubbing to understand how AVT influences character portrayal and cultural values. Findings reveal subtitles closely align with the film's original feminist narrative, whereas dubbing often modifies it to suit traditional patriarchal norms. Highlighting the significance of translation strategies in global film communication, this study underscores their impact on gender identity and cross-cultural interpretation, offering valuable insights for handling complex gender and cultural content in film.

Keywords: Audio-visual Translation, Gender Representation, Feminist Narrative Translation, *Mulan*.

1 Introduction

In today's globalised world, Audiovisual Translation (AVT) is crucial for cross-cultural communication, particularly in movies where it is essential to convey cultural traits and societal values. This is especially true for films representing gender roles and values, which are deeply influenced by social and cultural contexts. The contrasting global reception of Disney's *Mulan* (1998 animated and 2020 live-action movie) exemplifies these dynamics. The transformation of *Mulan*'s character in the 2020 version, from an ordinary girl to a superhero embodying feminist ideals and reflecting the influence of the #MeToo movement, highlights the evolving perceptions of cultural products.

Despite its importance, existing research overlooks the pivotal role of subtitling and dubbing in reshaping characters and conveying culture in films. This study, focusing on the Chinese subtitles and dubbing of *Mulan*, investigates how translation strategies handle gender portrayal and cultural expressions, influencing the film's reception across different cultures. This study aims to deepen the understanding of AVT theory by exploring the portrayal of gender and cultural themes in films, particularly through an analysis of the divergences between subtitle and dubbing translations. It focuses on how these translation methods handle Chinese cultural elements, with implications for the global dissemination and perception of audio-visual products.

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2 Literature Review

AVT is vital in movies for conveying cultural and gender representations. This study uses Disney's *Mulan* (2020) as a case study to delve into the role of AVT in gender expression and cultural narrative, especially in reshaping gender temperament through subtitling and dubbing.

Moreover, AVT, as a crucial component of translation studies, encompasses the adaptation of films, TV shows and other media, with a focus on accurately converting language and context. Key works by Pérez-González (2014)[5] and Díaz-Cintas (2004)[6] emphasise AVT's significance in global media, particularly in managing cross-cultural elements. Della Chiaro's (2008)[7] insights differentiate dubbing and subtitling, foundational in understanding the diverse conveyance of gender and cultural messages in *Mulan*.

The interplay of AVT, gender studies and feminist theory forms the core of this research. Butler's (1990)[8] theories on the social construction of gender and De Marco's (2012)[9] exploration of sexist terminology in film underscore AVT's influence on gender portrayal. Additionally, Mulvey's (1975)[10] gaze theory, relevant in understanding how different translation methods can manipulate the perception of gender roles, underpins the analysis of *Mulan*'s Chinese subtitles and dubbing.

The research also builds on Feral's (2011)[11] comparative study of *Sex and the City*'s French subtitles and dubbing, revealing how translation choices align with the target audience's beliefs and values. This highlights the importance of AVT in shaping gender ideologies across cultures, relevant in contrasting *Mulan*'s subtitled and dubbed versions.

The current research by scholars on the 2020 movie *Mulan* focuses on translation theory, such as cultural-bound words in subtitles from the perspectives of ecological translatology, functional equivalence theory, communicative translation theory, skopos theory and multimodality, etc. However, current scholarship overlooks the differential impact of subtitling and dubbing in gender portrayal. This study fills this gap by analysing how these approaches shape feminist narratives and respond to cultural expectations, offering insights into the integration of AVT and feminist perspectives.

This literature review paves the way for an in-depth analysis of *Mulan*'s translations, emphasising the need for strategic AVT choices in global film dissemination and the representation of gender roles in various cultural contexts.

3 Methodology

This research employs qualitative text analysis to scrutinise the Chinese subtitles and dubbing of the 2020 film *Mulan*, focusing on how different translation strategies affect character portrayal and feminist narratives. Three versions of Chinese subtitles were selected for their wide accessibility and influence: the official traditional Chinese subtitles from Disney+[1], the simplified Chinese subtitles from Tencent Video[2] and a popular online video version[3]. The official Chinese dubbed version[4], released in

mainland China, serves as a comparative benchmark to assess the variances in gender role depiction between subtitles and dubbing.

This paper created a bilingual corpus including 1 English text and a total of 4 Chinese translations. Then, key segments within the *Mulan* corpus were extracted and analysed. This analysis, grounded in the theoretical backdrop of AVT, gender studies and gaze theory, scrutinises how translation choices shape characters and convey cultural messages. The study particularly focuses on differences in gender representation, language usage and cultural references between subtitled and dubbed versions, aiming to unveil the underlying mechanisms of cultural and gender construction in translation. Ultimately, this research seeks to enrich the understanding of AVT's impact on gender roles and cultural narratives, contributing to the broader academic discourse in these fields.

4 Data Analysis and Discussion

This section examines how various translation versions of *Mulan* influence the depiction of gender identities and societal expectations. It will explore three primary themes: entrenched gender roles and patriarchal values, the feminist portrayal of *Mulan* and the disparities between male and female perspectives. This analysis aims to deepen our understanding of how translation strategies shape gender representation in the film.

4.1 Traditional Gender Roles and Patriarchal Views

This part analyses the dialogue of *Mulan*'s father, which epitomises conventional gender roles and social norms. His words reflect entrenched patriarchal values and underscore the portrayal and interpretation of gender across different cultural contexts.

Table 1. The Dialogue of *Mulan*'s Father

Source text	Subtitles (online video)	Subtitles (Tencent Video)	Subtitles (Disney+)	Dubbing
Could you tell her that only a son could wield chi?	你能告诉她只有男子才能运气吗 ("Can you tell her that only men can wield chi?")	你忍心告诉她 只有男子才能运用元气吗 ("Can you bear to tell her that only men can use vitality?")	妳們能告訴她兒子才能善用真氣嗎 ("Can you tell her that only a son can make good use of his energy?")	你会告诉她 只有男人才可以展示自己的力量 ("You will tell her that only men can show their strength")

Table 1 is at the beginning of the movie, *Mulan*'s father narrates her innate 气 (*Qi/chi*), signifying societal constraints on female potential. The translation of his query, "Could you tell her that only a son could wield *Chi*? That a daughter would risk shame, dishonour, exile?" varies across subtitled versions but commonly retains the question form, as in "Can you tell her that only men can wield *Chi*?" This reflects the father's hesitance to confine her abilities. However, the dubbing shifts to a definitive statement: "You will tell her that only men can show their strength," thereby endorsing societal norms and reinforcing gender limitations. These translational choices highlight

how each version either maintains or intensifies the narrative's traditional gender roles, with subtitles preserving the text's nuance and dubbing crystallising societal expectations.

In another example (example 4.2), Mulan's father reiterates conventional gender roles, asserting that "I am the father. It is my place to bring honour to our family on the battlefield" and reinforcing societal expectations for women to occupy their "proper place." His dialogue underscores the stark gender dichotomy within traditional social norms, where women's modesty and focus on marriage are paramount. The translated versions exhibit nuanced variances that encapsulate his authoritative role, with expressions like *我是一家之主* (the head of the family) (Online video, Disney+), underscoring varying degrees of paternal dominance.

Moreover, "You are the daughter! Learn your place," from Mulan's father, is rendered differently across translations, with phrases like *摆正你的位置* (Correct your place) (Online video) or *守好你的本分* (Keep your duty) (Dubbing) reflecting societal mandates for the decorum and subservience of women. Notably, "Keep your duty," imbues a conservative slant, advising women to conceal their capabilities - a stark contrast to the subtitles that retain the source's ambiguity. This dichotomy between the subtitled and dubbed versions not only reveals the cultural constraints imposed on women but also the perpetuation of submissive female stereotypes within a patriarchal matrix.

This analysis lays bare the tension between entrenched gender roles and the aspirational motifs of female autonomy. The patriarchal viewpoint, as espoused by Mulan's father, juxtaposes the film's progressive protagonist, illustrating how translations mediate the portrayal of gender ideologies. This reflection on translation underscores its pivotal role in navigating and reshaping gender narratives across cultural dialogues.

4.2 Characterisation of Mulan's Femininity and Strength

Scholars contend that the film, *Mulan* (2020), challenges entrenched gender archetypes by presenting a lead with a nuanced gender expression (Xu, 2021)[12]. This segment evaluates the role of Chinese subtitles and dubbing in crafting Mulan's feminist portrayal and contrasts these with conventional female depictions.

In example 4.3, in a sequence where Mulan recounts a horseback escapade, she says "I think one was a male, one was a female. But you know, you can't really tell when they're running that fast," intending to blur gender distinctions, suggesting her erudition and gender neutrality. Chinese audiences will be aware that the English is translated from the ancient Chinese poem *The Ballad of Mulan* (*木兰辞*; *mu lan ci*). However, only the online subtitle retains the Chinese poem's text, highlighting Mulan's cultivated persona with neutral tones, while other versions opt for colloquialisms, trivialising her character and thereby diminishing her feminist and androgynous portrayal. For example, the dubbing is *我猜一只是公的, 一只是母的, 不过其实我也分不清楚, 它们跑得太快了* ("I guess one is male and one is female; But actually I can't tell the difference, they run so fast") with a cute tone to shape Mulan as an innocent and immature little girl, which to some extent weakens her feminist temperament and neutral beauty.

A particular scene, example 4.4, where *Mulan* strategises for war, further delineates her as a sagacious tactician, “if employed correctly,” “four ounces can move 1,000 pounds.” The latter part is a well-known Chinese Taoist maxim, reinforcing her strategic acumen. The online and Tencent videos have translated this line faithfully into the traditional saying, 四两拨千斤 (“*si liang bo qian jin*”). While the dubbing opts for simplified vernacular, 小兵也能扭转一场危局 (“A small soldier can turn a crisis around”), diluting the sophistication of her counsel and the image of her valiant leadership. The divergent translations thus shape distinct character profiles: the subtitled *Mulan* emerges as a strategic warrior, whereas the dubbed version conforms her to more traditional feminine moulds.

In addition, upon examination of the subtitled and dubbed renditions of *Mulan*’s dialogue, it becomes apparent that subtitles typically adopt a declarative mode, which underlines *Mulan*’s gender-neutral and composed attributes. Conversely, the dubbed version incorporates a range of modal particles that infuse the character’s speech with emotional depth and variability, such as 吧 (*ba*), which attenuates the speaker’s assertiveness, and 呢 (*ne*), which serves to soften and modulate the discourse (Zhao, 2023)[13]. In contrast to the subtitles’ portrayal, the infusion of these modulations in the dubbed version subtly shifts *Mulan*’s presentation, inflecting her originally neutral persona with a nuanced, traditionally feminine softness.

In sum, the study reveals that subtitled translations uphold the film’s feminist intent, contrasting with dubbed adaptations that recalibrate *Mulan*’s persona to align with traditional gender roles. These insights underscore the intricate balance translation strategies strike between cultural fidelity and the expectations of diverse audiences, highlighting their critical role in gender portrayal across cultures.

4.3 Contrast between Male and Female Perspectives

This section further explores the contrast between male and female perspectives in *Mulan*. The depiction of female attractiveness in male dialogue within *Mulan*’s cohort reflects entrenched traditional gender roles, portraying men as dominant and women as passive. This inquiry scrutinises the portrayal of women in male narratives across different translation methods and assesses their influence on gender representation.

Table 2. The Dialogue of *Mulan*’s Comrade

Source text	Subtitles (online video)	Subtitles (Tencent Video)	Subtitles (Disney+)	Dubbing
Her skin is white as milk.	她肤如凝脂 (“Her skin is like cream”)	她的皮肤光洁如凝脂 (“Her skin is as smooth as cream”)	肌膚雪白如乳 (“Skin as white as milk”)	古诗有云 肤如凝脂 (“An ancient poem goes like this: Skin is like gelatin”)
Her fingers like the tender white roots of a green onion.	指如葱白 (“Fingers as white as scallions”)	玉手纤纤如葱白 (“Jade hands are as slender as scallions”)	纖纖細指宛如葱白 (“Slender fingers as white as scallions”)	手如那个 那个春天的柔荑一样细嫩 (“The hands are as delicate as that spring catkin”)
Her eyes are like morning dewdrops...	目似朝露 (“Eyes like morning dew”)	一双美目耀如晨露 (“A pair of beautiful eyes shining like morning dew”)	雙眸宛如晨露 (“Eyes like morning dew”)	巧笑倩兮 美目盼兮 (“Beautiful smile and beautiful eyes”)

In a conversation where Mulan's comrades talked about the ideal image of women in the military camp, Table 2 is Comrade Ling who describes his ideal feminine beauty and utilises metaphors such as "Her skin is white as milk. Her fingers like the tender white roots of scallions. Her eyes are like morning dewdrops..." He uses three metaphorical terms to objectify the female appearance: "milk", "white roots of scallions", and "dewdrops". The subtitled versions tend to translate these as four characters, such as 肤如凝脂 ("the skin is creamy"), 指如葱白 ("finger as white as scallions"), and 目似朝露 ("eyes like morning dew"), showing the emphasis on female's external beauty under the male gaze. However, the dubbed translation refers to the original text from *The Book of Songs* (诗经; shi jing), a collection of ancient Chinese poems: 手如柔荑, 肤如凝脂 ("Hands are like catkins, skin is like gelatin") and 巧笑倩兮, 美目盼兮 ("Beautiful smile and beautiful eyes"), which beautifies the appearance of the women and also improves the cultural quality of this male character.

In this analysis, both subtitling and dubbing - particularly dubbing with its invocation of classical poetry from *The Book of Songs* - manifest a clear intention to embellish and poeticise the dialogue, thereby culturally enriching the male speaker's portrayal. This nuanced translation elevates the male character's discourse, endowing him with a sense of sophistication and erudition. Conversely, while the original English text of example 4.3 straightforwardly translates the Chinese poetry, the translations, especially the dubbing, forgo the poetic elements in favour of colloquial expressions. Similarly, the dubbing in Example 4.4 employs a more colloquial style, thereby diminishing the portrayal of women as cultured and educated.

Example 4.6 is still in the same scene where Mulan's comrades are sharing their ideal female physical characteristics, involving sexual taboos in their descriptions. Comrades A and B say respectively, "I like my women buxom, with strong, wide hips. I like kissing women with cherry red lips." The subtitled versions choose a literal translation, such as the Disney version in traditional Chinese, 我喜歡我的女人胸部豐滿, 屁股又寬又大, 我喜歡親吻女人的櫻桃小嘴 ("I like my women to have big breasts. Butt is wide and big. I like to kiss a woman's cherry mouth"). It conveys the objectifying male gaze explicitly. These terms, breasts and butt, highlight sexual objectification within the traditional societal framework, reflecting enduring gender power imbalances. In contrast, the dubbed version mitigates the explicitness of such taboos, significantly softening the descriptions to more culturally palatable terms like 我就喜欢长得丰满的, 哈哈, 我喜欢长着樱桃小嘴的姑娘 ("I just like plump ones, hahaha, and I like girls with cherry lips"). This alteration not only tones down the overt sexualisation but also aligns better with societal expectations of decorum and virtue traditionally ascribed to women, refining the male speakers' portrayal to appear more cultured and considerate.

Moreover, the translation strategies demonstrate a deep sensitivity to the target audience's cultural norms and taboos. While subtitles maintain fidelity to the source, preserving the original's explicitness, the dubbing adapts the content for local sensibilities, illustrating the complex dynamics of cross-cultural translation in audio-visual media. These adaptations reveal the translators' strategic decisions to balance authenticity with

cultural appropriateness, underscoring the nuanced challenges of gender representation in translation.

The broader implications of these translational choices are profound. They underscore the significant role of translation in shaping gender perceptions across different cultures and highlight the necessity for translators to navigate complex socio-cultural landscapes thoughtfully. This section illuminates the divergent approaches in subtitling and dubbing, revealing their impact on gender portrayal and the intricate interplay of language, culture and gender in audio-visual translations.

5 Conclusion

This research elucidates the intricate dynamics between translation strategies and the construction of gendered identities within diverse cultural milieus, specifically through the lens of the film, *Mulan*. It delineates that subtitled translations predominantly preserve the integrity of the film's feminist discourse, whereas dubbing adaptations tend to acquiesce to established patriarchal ideologies. Particularly noteworthy is the dubbing's inclination towards vernacular and gender-normative expressions that starkly deviate from the original feminist portrayal, thus perpetuating traditional gender biases and underscoring the influence of male-dominated narrative frameworks on the construction of female characterisations.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted, shedding light on the crucial function of audio-visual translation in the era of globalisation, where it emerges as a battleground for feminist narratives and entrenched cultural axioms. The study's meticulous dissection of *Mulan* serves as a prototype for further scholarly inquiry, suggesting an expansion of the corpus to encompass a broader spectrum of feminist cinema. This will enable a more comprehensive assessment of translation strategies against the backdrop of diverse cultural landscapes, contributing to a more nuanced discourse on gender portrayal in cross-cultural cinematic exchanges. Future scholarship should, therefore, engage with a wider array of feminist narratives to unravel the complexities inherent in translating gendered ideologies across variegated cultural matrices, thereby enriching the academic discourse on transnational film studies.

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