

Intercultural Music in Media: Representations of Chinese Music History and Culture within *Korra* and *Mulan*

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ABSTRACT

Through a case study on “The Legend of Korra” and “Reflection,” the representative musical pieces within Nickelodeon’s *The Legend of Korra* (henceforth *Korra*) (2012-2014) and Disney’s *Mulan* (1998) respectively, I examine how different cultural traditions are combined to create a piece of intercultural media. In particular, I explore how Orientalism has persisted in Western media through its superficial inclusion of other cultural traditions. Contrasting these strains of Orientalist thought, *Korra* especially stands out as an example of interculturalism through its music. This is primarily because it draws on the nuanced level of cohesion established between *Korra*’s narrative elements such as world building and plot, as well as its cultural influences. Consequently, I argue that *Korra* stands as an ideal model for how to incorporate both Western and non-Western elements in meaningful ways, and can serve to inform future narratives on the pressing issues of cultural appropriation and representation. With the recent release of the live-action remake of Disney’s *Mulan*, it is imperative to address the cultural shortcomings of modern Western media, and by what standard we should be judging when assessing its incorporation of other cultures.

Introduction

Although culture is a distinguishing feature of many groups, what constitutes a culture with respect to history, people, and space has become increasingly difficult to define due to globalization. This dilemma is expanded upon by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in his discussion of ethnoscaping within his book, *Modernity at Large*. Appadurai uses ethnoscaping as a framework to describe how cultural communities are no longer rigid entities in the modern day, but now encompass a wider and mobile range of people includ-

ing tourists and refugees (33-34). Consequently, Appadurai further posits that the “cultural reproduction of group identity” in the twentieth century is largely shaped by changing internal and external environments (48). Because groups are now rarely “tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous” according to Appadurai, the “imagination” of one’s culture and that of others has drastically shifted from being contained to one source to being fed by many sources (48). However, the inverse, where

one dominant group/idea informs the global perceptions of a culture, is also now possible. Central to the development of globalization in the modern day is the overwhelming presence of media giants such as Disney and Nickelodeon. Knowing their expansive cultural reach, it is then worth examining their portrayals of non-Western cultures, and whether their products actually do service to what they represent. However, rather than focusing on the purity of its portrayal of another culture, I will instead be focusing on its merits as an intercultural piece of media – whether its originating influences and representations of outside influences are balanced and work together equally. If this is not the case, there is a danger that the piece of media in question may reproduce harmful cultural ideas such as Orientalist ones. Coined by Edward Said, Orientalism is a multidisciplinary term used to describe “interconnected” ideas and systems of power upheld by the West (*Orientalism*, 10). It predominantly revolves around the conception of difference and ergo inferiority of Eastern cultures, which imperialists believe justifies Western encroachment into foreign territory politically and culturally (*Orientalism* 14-15). A standard example of Orientalist prejudices and stereotypes in cultural works from the West is the depiction of non-Western peoples as exotic, primitive, and uncivilized.

In my paper, I approach this topic through a juxtaposition of Disney’s *Mulan* with *The Legend of Korra* (henceforth *Korra*), an animated television series similarly inspired by China, as a case study on how non-Western cultural traditions and history are used, and whether these influences culminate in a piece of intercultural media or persist in perpetuating Orientalist notions of China specifically. In particular, my discussion will focus on an analysis of “Reflection” and “The Legend Korra,” the representative pieces of music within both works, and how its connections to cultural traditions and narrative components such as setting, world building, and plot reinforce the presence of interculturalism or Orientalism. These components play an integral role in shaping the intercultural aspects

of the music, because they provide the context for the portrayal and development of characters within the fictional world, as well as the impressions they impart to the audience. Ultimately, I argue that based on the cohesion between its narrative components and cultural influences, *Korra*’s music demonstrates how the series as a whole succeeds where *Mulan* does not in being an intercultural product that presents a nuanced depiction of both Chinese and Western cultural traditions in action.

Background

To begin, *Korra* is a fantasy series made in America that centers around the journey of Korra, the main protagonist, to fully master her powers both physically and spiritually. It is the sequel to *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (henceforth *Avatar*), an animated series by the same creators. In the fictional world of *Avatar* and *Korra*, some people are able to manipulate or “bend” the elements of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water through martial art forms specific to each element’s corresponding civilization: the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation, the Air Nomads, and the Water Tribes. Korra is born as the next “Avatar” in the reincarnation cycle of these elements. As a result she is capable of mastering all four elements and is tasked with the responsibility of maintaining balance in the world.

The setting is heavily inspired by East Asian and Indigenous culture and aesthetics throughout the world. However, I will primarily focus on its Chinese influences, which includes “bending” itself. Because the concept of “bending” is a central example of the relationship between narrative and worldbuilding in the series, I will expand on it before highlighting its relationship to the music of *Korra*. Firstly, from information gathered from the video, “Avatar: Creating the Legend” and Season 2 Episode 9 of *Avatar* (13:29-14:20):

- Earth bending is primarily based on the Hun Gar style, which emphasizes a strong foundation to the ground. It is “the element of substance.” Similarly, “the people from the Earth kingdom are...persistent and enduring.”

- Fire Bending draws from Northern Shaolin Kungfu, which is aggressive as well as dynamic. It is “the element of power” and the nation’s people are characterized by the will and drive to achieve what they desire.
- Air bending is inspired by Bagua, which focuses on a circular movement of energy rather than direct force. It is “the element of freedom” and the nomads emphasize detachment to achieve enlightenment.
- Finally, Water bending is based on Tai Chi, which prioritizes flexibility and the control of flow. It is “the element of change.” People from the water tribes are devoted to community and a sense of family.

These martial art forms and their corresponding imagery then constitute the philosophies and values of each civilization in the world of *Avatar* and *Korra*. Moreover, they inform the ways in which each character approaches confrontation. These are important details to note because it is a prime example of how the world building behind *Korra* is so steeped in a nuanced representation of cultural ideas despite it being produced by a Western studio like *Mulan*. This commitment to consistency extends to the music of *Korra*, which was also produced by Western composers, and contributes to it becoming a greater intercultural blend of Chinese and Western traditions when compared with Disney’s *Mulan*.

***Mulan* Musical Analysis**

Beginning with *Mulan*, an analysis of the musical components of “Reflection” such as its style, structure and instrumentation reveals the film’s stronger Western influences, as well as the Orientalist ideas embedded within it. This primarily stems from how the ballad on which *Mulan* is based is ambiguous in its time and location, giving the creators of the film more creative freedom in shaping its fictional world. However, the resulting cultural and historical inconsistencies when compared with *Korra* betrays *Mulan*’s dominating Western influences and sensibilities. *Mulan*’s “Reflection” mirrors this imbalance. As a soliloquy grappling

with individual identity in the face of a rigid social structure, it draws heavily from Western musical theatre, rather than the ancient court music accurate to the imperial image of the film. This type of music emphasizes timbre (the tone or quality of sounds) from a selected group of pitches over lyrical melody, and has ritualistic purposes. Sound was intrinsically tied to spirituality during this period in China, and the resonance of certain frequencies was believed to create greater cosmic harmony between heaven and the earth (Liang 63-64, 98). In a similar vein, “Reflection” does not draw from the structure and style of historical Chinese popular music. This includes its own musical theatre genre, which is composed of Zaju, Kun Opera and Peking Opera. Central to these musical forms are established melodic and percussive motifs or ideas that serve narrative purposes in conjunction with singing and acting rather than solely being background instrumentals (Liang 120-126, 130-133).

Instead, “Reflection” is best read as an example of Western musical theater’s “I want” song, which outlines the key desires and motivations of a character. These songs are sung in the early acts of a story, and the underlying instrumentals help to ensure a seamless transition between what is spoken and sung (Sideways 13:00-15:37). Although it contains Chinese instruments like the pipa, it is still a very superficial representation of Chinese music because they merely serve to colour the piece with an ambiguous Chinese flair. The instruments do not take a leading role in the song, nor does their performance draw on each instrument’s respective history and playing traditions. Said critiques this aspect of vagueness in artistic works in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, for its Orientalist implications. In his chapter on Verdi’s *Aida*, an Opera set in Egypt, he discusses how “modally exotic music” and the use of “less literal and more suggestive musical means” such as instrumentation creates a “heightened” vision of foreign settings (121-122). This in turn is less representative of the culture in question, and instead reveals the perspective of a Western audience and creators, which has been inflected by co-

lonial dynamics of power and the exoticized other (121). Knowing the abundance of resources Disney has and their accessibility to a wide audience, this superficial level of incorporation is a cheap shortcut for Disney to have taken with *Mulan*. It does little to actually represent its cultural roots while still garnering them the desired impact and impression. This demonstrates not only a lack of effort or consideration on their part, but also severely undermines their commitment to “authenticity” to which they praised themselves for within the Disney Editions Classic ed. of *The Art of Mulan* (75).

Narrative Connections

Moreover, the subject matter of the song and its ambiguous connection to the central values within the original ballad further reinforce the existence of Orientalist ideas, demonstrating how *Mulan* is not as intercultural as it may initially appear. The underlying individualist narrative within “Reflection” is contrary to the importance placed on filial piety that forms a core part of the ballad and the periods of Chinese history that the film drew from. These include the Han, Qing, and Ming dynasties according to the Original ed. of *The Art of Mulan* (72). Disney’s *Mulan* follows the basic plot of the original ballad in that Mulan leaves to fight in place of her father, illustrating her commitment to her family’s well-being and honour. However, Disney’s version incorporates an additional search for individual identity within the social structure of Imperial China. This is represented in “Reflection” when Mulan sings that she could never be the “perfect” bride and daughter according to such familial expectations and that of the Chinese social structure at large. The song establishes her conflict with these expectations, and that she desires to instead determine her own identity so that her reflection will “show who [she] is inside,” despite how it would “break her family’s heart.” It presents to us how Mulan is disconnected from her expected social role because it does not allow her to “truly be [herself].” This individualist sentiment is reinforced by both the former and current presidents of Walt Disney Animation Studio, Peter Schneider and

Thomas Schumacher. They are quoted in the Disney Editions Classic ed. artbook of *Mulan* describing how her story is that of finding one’s self (189). However, despite “Reflection” characterizing her in opposition to the role expected of her, Mulan then acts accordingly with it, leaving it uncertain what relationship she truly has with piety. Although Mulan appears to value piety by taking her father’s place in a war, she is just as much leaving to figure out her own identity. In the end, she is able to carve out her own place in the world despite its restrictions on her. Consequently, this inconsistency in values is telling of the cultural imbalances within the film.

Additionally, racial and cultural stereotypes exist in the film through its characters and story. According to Mia Adessa Towbi et al.’s study on Disney films, *Mulan* contains stereotypes about gender as well as “exaggerated” racial character designs (32). The chief examples of these criticisms being the design of Chi Fu, the advisor, and the matchmaking scene, which the article describes as being historically inaccurate and represents China as “far more sexist and oppressive than it actually was” to amplify the dichotomy in cultural values (28-32, 39). Moreover, although the film is earnest in depicting cultural landmarks and aesthetics, and portrays it positively and accurately to an extent, I contend that it is done more to establish the spectacle of how different the Chinese or Oriental world is. Locations such as the Forbidden City are backdrops to Mulan’s story of overcoming the world. She is not necessarily a part of it, because she and her story are designed with Western-centric ideas in mind. Even the martial arts displayed in the film are an example of spectacle that comes from a long line of films portraying Chinese culture; they have no greater connection to the world and narrative in the way that bending in *Avatar* and *Korra* does. This Orientalist critique is echoed in Michelle Anya Anjirbag’s article examining *Mulan* and *Moana* as colonial products, as well as the cultural harm of Disney appropriating non-Western figures and stories. In her discussion of *Mulan*, she describes how Disney’s representations of China are “stripped of context” and “embed historical in-

accuracies" into the original narrative (5). In doing so intentionally or not, Disney ultimately reinforces Orientalist stereotypes that appeal to a Western understanding of China. This in turn underscores the idea that the Western conception of the other is what is "universally understood" (5). Moreover, because it is a Disney film, audiences are inclined to believe that Disney's vision of *Mulan* is a culturally and historically accurate film (Yin 55). Returning to Said, the "selectivity" of *Mulan*'s worldbuilding then underlines a lack of "awareness" regarding a culture's history and ideologies in favour of a product that appeals to a Western audience (*Culture and Imperialism* 123). Consequently, it is clear that *Mulan* and subsequently its music are not free from Orientalist strains of thought. Although the film's musical and narrative shortcomings reasonably stem from a desire to create a piece of media that can be understood by Western audiences and their values, it still contains a structure that promotes "the difference between the familiar and the strange" as proposed by Said that is ultimately untruthful and at worst misinformative (*Orientalism*, 51). This conception of "difference" (51) that Said points out as a central factor of Orientalism is made abundantly clear by another quote from Schumacher, wherein the production team visualized China as "mystical" and "a rich and evocative environment and story source, one that we had never really tapped before at Disney..." while ironically not recognizing how this perspective is exactly the "colonial" idea – that is, "external forces coming in to exotic country" – that the team was trying to avoid (31, 79; Disney Editions Classic ed.). The Orientalist overtones echoed in this quote and within the film serve to strengthen the production team's acknowledgement of how *Mulan* is an "essentially Western" product rather than an intercultural one (67; Disney Editions Classic ed.). It additionally complicates their discussion of *Mulan*'s "authenticity" and how its fictional world is "unique...belonging only to *Mulan*" (75; Disney Editions Classic ed.). In describing *Mulan* as such, the team evokes ideas of *transculturation* despite how *Mulan* is only dubiously intercultural to begin with. Coined by anthro-

pologist Fernando Ortiz, *transculturation* is a term used to discuss cultures with an unequal balance of power coming together and becoming interconnected. In his book, *The Social Phenomenon of 'Transculturation' and Its Importance*, Ortiz describes this process as something beyond one culture acquiring another, which carries colonialist implications of loss. It instead focuses on the creation of something distinct when two cultures meet and intersect (103). However, it is apparent from the Orientalist connections between the music and the world built up by the narrative revealed in "Reflection" that *Mulan* does not engage with what makes a work transcultural. Furthermore, these shortcomings in representing cultural ideas and the focus on spectacle make it evident that the film and its music are also not as intercultural as Disney would suggest.

Korra Musical Analysis

In comparison, I argue that *Korra*'s execution of its narrative and music are more balanced between its Chinese and Western inspirations, thereby demonstrating how *Korra* is a more intercultural work. This is best illustrated by *Korra*'s titular piece, which contains various aspects of Chinese and Western musical traditions. To give additional context, the specific period informing *Korra* is the twentieth century according to its Season 1 artbook (38). This is the time period when China was experiencing a resurgence in its folk music traditions as well as a great flow of influence from the West's Classical tradition (Liang 136-153). Ergo, *Korra* is predisposed to incorporate both its influences in a more intercultural manner from the start and follows up on this opportunity to represent it unlike *Mulan*.

Beginning with its influences from Western Classical music, in addition to composition style and technique, these influences can primarily be found in its ensemble arrangement. In episode 30 of *Sound Exploder*, the piece's composer, Jeremy Zuckerman, states that it includes a trio of strings alongside Chinese instruments (05:35-0:6:13, 07:28-07:33, 8:22-08:45). Western layering of harmonies can also be

heard through the use of artificial harmonics (specific high-pitched overtones) played by the trio and the pitched percussion instruments throughout the background of the whole piece (06:32-07:34). Another important facet of Western influence is the inclusion of a solo Zhonghu alongside a solo Erhu. According to Jonathan Stock's article on the history of Erhu, the Chinese fiddle, the Zhonghu was created in the twentieth century as part of a project to develop a Chinese version of the violin family, which together had a greater range in pitch and richness of sound quality (104). The vibrato (a technique where the musician wobbles the pitch for an aesthetic effect) that can be heard in the main melody can also be attributed to Chinese-Western interculturalism, because it is a technique refined by the Classical violin tradition (Stock 102-103).

Conversely, in featuring a solo Erhu and Zhonghu, the music is clearly drawing from China's strong narrative folk music traditions from the twentieth century and the emerging solo tradition of the instruments spanning the Han dynasty to the Republican era despite the piece not being sung (Liang 91, 116-120, 136-151). Moreover, it is also informed by the more lyrical quality of solo music such as the pieces composed by Liu Tianhua and Hua Yanjun later in the twentieth century (Liang 151). The distinct but simple main melodic motif (00:49-01:20) in the piece to represent a larger narrative is then not just evocative of an imagined China; it actually embodies its history of folk melodies and narrative folk songs. These traditions are further highlighted by the motif that finishes the piece (02:55-03:09). The 5 note musical idea is quoted from the series' own musical continuity; it is a callback to "Safe Return" from *Avatar*. Its rearrangement and inclusion reflect the historical emphasis on established ideas and stories being passed down and reimagined within Chinese folk music (Liang 116, 151). From a motif for safety in the war-torn world of the child protagonists in *Avatar*, it has become an indicator of moving forward and finding inner peace and belonging in Korra's journey.

Narrative Connections

This tie to a *narrative* musical tradition is an especially prominent facet of *Korra* and the piece's interculturalism considering the scene the piece is scored for. It plays at the finale of the series and represents the culmination of Korra's journey to become an Avatar capable of protecting the world. However, it is also the culmination of a "historic" love story during both the final episode and in the real world as Zuckerman notes in the podcast (08:20). For the first time in an American children's animated television series, we get *explicit* confirmation of an LGBTQ+ relationship. Moreover, this relationship is between two bisexual women of colour of two different ethnicities. In the words of Joanna Robinson's *Vanity Fair* article, this "changed the face of TV" in 2014. It is a pivotal moment in the history of the medium, since many series that did feature LGBTQ+ relationships prior to this in the West (or brought over to the West) are either censored, recontextualized, left ambiguous, alluded to very briefly, or confirmed retroactively. Major examples of this include the explicitly lesbian couple of the anime series, *Sailor Moon*, being censored as "cousins" in its Western release (Dorneman), as well as J.K. Rowling's retroactive announcement of Dumbledore being homosexual (Reuters). In comparison to this, the final scene of *Korra* is intentionally scored to be "romantic" and to question the unspoken "paradigm that marginalizes nonheterosexual people" as stated by the series' co-creator Byran Konietzko in his *Tumblr* blog post. Even if the scene is only able to depict the couple holding hands as a sign of their relationship due to limitations from network executives, which Konietzko acknowledges as not a "slam-dunk victory for queer representation," *Korra* still stands as the proverbial "foot-in-the-door" that helped to pave the way for greater diversity in content. This is vital because marginalized groups, whether it be identities or cultures, deserve good representation. Using the extensive outreach of their platform, especially to younger audiences, media giants have the potential to effectively normalize and teach empathy and understanding toward the other. In this way, *Korra*

is also more successful at being a transcultural product compared to *Mulan*. In addition to being intercultural, it went beyond its roots to become a work that resonates with the past and the present.

However, it should be noted that despite *Korra* being a product of Nickelodeon, credit for what *Korra* has accomplished as an intercultural work does not wholly fall on the network's shoulders. Their support for *Korra* was always tenuous at best and it increasingly weakened over time. In an interview with *Korra*'s animation director Yoo Jae-myung, it is revealed that Nickelodeon was so reluctant to accept the main character of *Korra* being a girl at the start that they temporarily suspended the production of the show (17:55-19:05). Nickelodeon's lack of support is further evidenced by how they permanently removed the series from their TV Broadcasting schedule in its third season and their limited support of the bisexual pairing (Konietzko). Nevertheless, what distinguishes Nickelodeon from Disney is that *Korra*'s production team used their platform and resources to push something unique and nuanced again and again. Although *Korra* and by extension its predecessor *Avatar* have their own shortcomings in their execution of cultural representation (one notable example being the designs of some of its Asian characters having white features), it is still evident that a great effort was put in to create a product that explores non-Western ideas, aesthetics, as well as modern issues in a substantial but accessible way for its target audience and beyond. Given what this has accomplished, Disney and other Western media giants should be held accountable to a higher standard of representation. This is especially relevant with regards to Disney's latest lucrative trend of remaking their older films, which includes *Mulan*. This remake comes six years after *Korra* and twenty-two years after the original *Mulan*. It would be absurd for Disney to keep deflecting their shortcomings in cultural representation and claim that their products are "erroneously" tied to its "corresponding cultural importance" while simultaneously praising themselves for their commitment to

"authenticity" (27, 75; *Disney Editions Classic* ed.). Consequently, it is apparent that unlike *Mulan*, *Korra* is steeped in what it means to be an effective intercultural work. This is demonstrated through its music, narrative, and how the grounded connections between them maintain a balance of Chinese and Western cultural traditions. Coming fifteen years after *Mulan*, *Korra* carries on *Avatar*'s legacy of nuanced and progressive representation. It sets the bar for what is possible and should be expected in media that use non-Western cultural traditions and what could also still be expanded on in the future. It is a legend in every shape of the word and a prime example of modern interculturalism.

Limitations of Study

One notable limitation of this study is its scale. This study only addresses two pieces of media in its discussion of interculturalism. In particular, *Avatar* was only discussed for context despite the fact that it precedes *Korra*. *Korra* was chosen for this study because I felt there were fewer critical explorations of its intercultural merits. Additionally, because the specific period informing its music is historically an intercultural highlight, it lent *Korra* an interesting avenue to pursue. A study in the future could address interculturalism in *Avatar*, as well as other franchises or media giants such as Dreamworks' *Kung Fu Panda* in a wider survey.

A future study could also approach interculturalism in media with a greater focus on corporations rather than their products. This would address logistical issues such as the ethnic demographic of their production team and consultants, as well as their history of producing inclusive media.

Conclusion

Because *Korra* is invested in establishing solid connections to its inspirations, and subsequently committed to the creation of a cohesive world and narrative, the music of the series is in turn informed by a greater depth of both Chinese and Western traditions. This demonstrates how *Korra* is a prime

example of an intercultural product. Although *Mulan*'s creative liberties and subsequent cultural shortcomings in musical and narrative composition do not necessarily detract from one's enjoyment of the film, it does not erase the Orientalist ideas embedded within it. It instead underscores how *Mulan* is neither an intercultural product nor is it an ideal example of representation because it does the bare minimum in incorporating Chinese culture. Moreover, it does not absolve Disney from making the effort to create conceptually well-rounded narrative components and music. This is important because the interplay between these components performs a crucial role in conveying not only the identity and emotional depth of a fictional world, but that of the real world as well. Given their abundance of capital, resources, and social clout, it is clear that Disney is capable of greater nuance in their work. Knowing what has since been successfully accomplished, they and other media producers should strive towards an honest and intercultural standard when representing other cultures in relation to the West. It is not enough for Western media giants to merely include outside cultural ideas, they have to be integrated in meaningful ways. Otherwise, it only serves to reinforce Orientalist attitudes and the precedent of superficiality regarding representations of non-Western cultures. While *Korra* is similarly driven by a Western narrative style of individual growth, the cohesion between its narrative components and musical ones makes it clear that it maintains a balance between its Chinese inspirations and Western identity. Meanwhile, the places where the execution of its narrative and representation does fall short point to what can be explored and refined in new works. Along these lines, I believe *Korra* sets a critical standard for fiction and representation involving other cultures and stands as a key model for how future narratives and cultural products can be made interculturally.

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